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A scenic design process for The Chemistry of Change: a production thesis in theatre design and technology

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A SCENIC DESIGN PROCESS FOR
THE CHEMISTRY OF CHANGE:
A PRODUCTION THESIS
IN THEATRE DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements of the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The Department of Music and Dramatic Arts

by
Stephen E. Haynes
B.S., Austin Peay State University, 1990
May 2002

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ABSTRACT

The scenic design for the Louisiana State University Theatre production of Marlane Meyer's The Chemistry of Change was selected and approved as my thesis project in the spring of 2001. This document represents a written account of the scenic design as it was conceived, developed, and executed. Records include research, a description of the design process, photographic evidence, and a final evaluation of the result.

INTRODUCTION

This document is a record of the journey that led to the final scenic design presented on stage for the October 2001 Louisiana State University Theatre production of Marlane Meyer's The Chemistry of Change.

This record will include the assignment of the project and initial reactions; a brief plot description including scenic requirements outlined in the script; initial research and concepts; all visual elements produced; and photographic evidence of the production. An evaluation of the final production will conclude this record.

In addition to providing a complete archival document of the scenic design for The Chemistry of Change, this record should also serve as an outline of one designer's process that may be applied to any production.

CHAPTER 1

SELECTION OF THE PROJECT AND INITIAL REACTIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will record the assignment of the project by my advisors, Professors Anderson and Gagliano. My initial reactions will be presented. A plot synopsis highlighting scenic requirements from the script is included.

ASSIGNMENT

In the spring semester of 2001 The Chemistry of Change by Marlane Meyer was assigned as my thesis project. To say that I was not thrilled about this assignment would indeed be an understatement. I had never heard of the play before; in fact, it had only been published in American Theatre magazine. Going into a thesis project based on a show that I was completely unfamiliar with was more than a little disconcerting. In addition to not being familiar with the script, Mr. Anthony Winkler was the assigned director of the project. I certainly have no problem with Mr. Winkler as a director. Mr. Winkler and I have had two very successful collaborations during our tenure at the Louisiana State University. Kid Twist and Polaroid Stories were both produced and directed by Mr. Winkler in the Spring 2000 and Spring 2001 semesters respectively and I provided the scenic designs for both productions. During my work on these projects, I found Mr. Winkler to be a fine director and certainly one that allowed a designer to do his job. My concern with Mr. Winkler, as director of the production, lay in the fact that during my time at the Louisiana State University I had continually been assigned to design his productions instead of working with other directors. My advisors, Professor Nels Anderson and Professor Louis Gagliano, assured me that this should not be a concern under the current circumstances. However, I was offered another option. I could use my spring design assignment, the Swine Palace production of Death of a Salesman, as my thesis project. I declined due to the time constraint that would have been placed on me. The Chemistry of Change would be my project.

My first order of business was to read the play. Mr. Winkler provided me with a photocopy of the play from American Theatre magazine. I avoided reading it for several weeks. Finally in late April of 2001, I resigned myself to the project and picked it up late one night. I felt immediate relief when I finished my first reading. I discovered that the script was very entertaining and included several fun and diverse characters. The biggest surprise was that the action of the play is set in the American nineteen fifties. Due to the colors, shapes, and themes used in this decade, the fifties are a personal favorite time period. I concluded that designing The Chemistry of Change could develop into a worthwhile project.

PLOT SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

In an introduction in American Theatre Magazine, Marlane Mayer describes her script for The Chemistry of Change as a morality play. The script contains several complex and confused characters that must deal not only with what fate has given them but also with their own life choices.

In the first scene we are introduced to three female characters: Corlis, thirty-six, Lee's daughter, is described as "vigilant and practical;" Dixon, Lee's younger sister is "witty, criminal, and attractive;" and Lee, fifty plus, is "a determined matriarch, glamorous, bright, and sexy." In this scene we learn several important facts. First among these is that Lee supports her family by performing illegal abortions. This fact is obviously an attempt to shock the audience; the play is set in the perceived sweet and innocent nineteen fifties and here is this woman, who is described as "glamorous and sexy," committing what some people would view as murder. We also learn that Lee is planning on getting married to the "junkyard king." This continues her history of marrying for money and quickly ending the union. Dixon is revealed as a woman willing to go along with any get rich scheme. Corlis is the most fascinating character up to this point. We learn that her mother considers her a "spinster," she was once in love with a man named Fred, and she has ambitions to become a nurse. It is also made obvious that Lee has no reservations about having Corlis stay home and care for the boys, her adult brothers. One of the brothers, Baron, is mentioned and we learn that he is a notorious alcoholic who has been in a detox center and will return home this day. A second brother briefly enters the scene; Mayer describes Farley, thirty-four, as "lazy, shiftless, and irritable." This scene takes place in the backyard of the family homestead. This setting is described by Ms. Mayer as "clapboard, California bungalow" and "a couple of trees with a clothes line strung between them."

After reading the first scene, my first thoughts about the scenery focused on the nineteen fifties. The fact that this woman was performing abortions, had a daughter that didn't mind saying the word "fuck" in front of her, and a sister who was interested in playing the numbers or spending time at the track offered a complete contrast to the decade of innocence that is perpetuated on television and in film. I initially felt that a squeaky-clean sitcom background would play perfectly as a backdrop against these characters.

In the second scene we are introduced to Baron at the detox hospital. Baron is described as thirty-eight, "handsome, bright, strong willed, and alcoholic." During this scene we learn that Baron feels his mother is ashamed of him and creates "archetypes" in order to "keep from seeing the truth." A silent male nurse is present during the scene, packing Baron's possessions as he delivers a monologue. The monologue seems oddly out of place and offers only the assumption that Baron sometimes feels like a monster. The device of the monologue delivered directly to the audience is not used in any other part of the script. I find the male nurse interesting as another anachronism of the period and together with several others statements throughout the play could be taken as a suggestion of Baron's lost masculinity or perhaps even homosexual tendencies. Ms.

Mayer describes the setting simply as a hospital. Due to the fact that Baron directly addresses the audience and his monologue is brief, my feeling was that this scene could easily be played in a pool of light with no other scenic support.

The third scene is a return to the back yard of Lee's house. This scene serves as an introduction to the interaction between Corlis and Baron. Corlis is obvious in her displeasure at having Baron return to the homestead. Important in this scene is the fact that Baron physically abuses Corlis. Baron "grabs her hand and pushes it back, she falls to her knees, screams." Corlis questions Baron's manhood by making fun of the fact that his homecoming means "living with your mother." The scene ends with Baron ordering Corlis to press his shirt. The idea that Baron is living in a world where women are a man's subordinate is juxtaposed with the strong will exhibited by Lee in the opening scene.

Scene four finds Lee wandering off from her city hall wedding appointment and ending up at a carnival attraction called "Hell Hole." Here we are introduced to Smokey, described by Ms. Mayer simply as "the catalyst." We first hear Smokey's rather poor Dracula impression on a public address system before he is physically revealed. Smokey appears in a red tuxedo and devil horns. He insists that Lee was drawn to the "Hell Hole" to keep from entering another loveless marriage. After a brief conversation and what must be a power equivalent to the Jedi mind trick, Lee is led into the mouth of the "Hell Hole" for a round of passion with Smokey. The script describes "Hell Hole" as a "large drop . . . the mouth of Satan, an entrance." Initially the "Hell Hole" was the most exciting scenic element for me. It was my feeling that it had to capture both fear, as the mouth of Satan, and seduction, as a place that Lee would be willing to enter.

Scene five takes us back to Lee's backyard with all of her children talking. We are introduced to Lee's final son; Shep, eighteen, "innocent, direct, and open." During the discussion we learn that Shep is going to be a father; he has apparently impregnated one of his teachers. The banter between the siblings in this scene demonstrates their immaturity. Lee finally enters looking "bedraggled but rejuvenated." Corlis immediately attends to Lee's feet by preparing a bowl of water and Epsom salt to soak them in while Lee chastises Baron for smoking. Smokey eventually makes an appearance and we learn that Lee did indeed wed that day only not to the "junkyard king" but "Hell Hole" proprietor, Smokey. The children are not happy about this development and are quick to let Lee know their feelings. Lee announces she has no intention of staying with Smokey until once again he uses his power and she melts in his arms. I really believe at this point in the script that Lee is for the first time in love. This scene and act ends with the three male children having a discussion about "finding their place in nature." It is a bit confusing at this point as to what Ms. Mayer's intentions are. She has given us a strong willed woman who has made her own way in life and provided for her children any way she could. Lee does not answer to any man. Suddenly Smokey, the Devil, is introduced into her life and she is putty in his hand. Are we to believe that every woman no matter how independent and strong is only waiting for the right bad boy to come along and sweep her off her feet? Perhaps Lee is looking for that ideal nineteen fifties herself.

The second act opens with Shep, Farley, and Corlis making minor repairs to their house. We learn that Corlis in particular is not happy about Lee's new husband and that Dixon has a physical attraction to Smokey. Dixon passes through on her way downtown to do "things" and the others note how dressed up she is. The scene ends with Corlis' lament that she "liked this place better when it was falling apart." This short scene serves primarily as a representation of passage of time. Scenically the script calls for the trio to be painting the house at the top of this scene. I really like the idea that things are literally changing in lives of these characters. It is, however, difficult to accomplish fake painting a house on stage, so another challenge was added to the design.

Scene two, act two, begins on a morning three weeks later. The scene begins with Corlis and Lee conversing about the changes that have occurred. We discover that "everyone's talking about getting jobs," a fact that displeases Corlis. Lee tells Corlis about Smokey's "Hell Hole" and her happiness at the progress her family has made. Corlis lets Lee know about Shep's impending fatherhood, which she is not in the least happy about. Shep enters and a confrontation ensues. Ultimately Shep stands up to his mother for the first time and Corlis is horrified that this pleases her. Lee offers to teach Corlis the business of "helping girls out of trouble," Corlis declines and Lee exits. Baron enters for a conversation with Corlis and we learn that Lee and Corlis "ran off" a woman that Baron loved. He ends up telling her that she sounds just like their mother. Farley and Dixon enter and both have gotten legitimate jobs thanks to Smokey's help. They both are finally excited about the future. The scene ends with them seeing Corlis offstage and questioning, "What's she wearing?" At this point in the script only Corlis has not accepted the changes that Smokey has brought to the family. It is interesting that she, along with the other children, are products of their environment but she is the last to take advantage of the chance to change that environment.

The next scene takes place at the "Hell Hole" which is closed due to the malfunction of a mummy that is determined to be a real human skeleton. Corlis enters wearing a homemade vamping dress and makes a pass at Smokey. Smokey dismisses her advances but does give her money so she can buy a uniform and attend nursing school. This scene is brief but the "Hell Hole" must appear different than in its act one appearance. The "Hell Hole" being closed for business is symbolic of Smokey's rejection of Corlis' advances. The drop should also appear less scary and inviting; literally a haunted house with all the lights on.

The final scene of the play begins with most members of the family celebrating their life changes with a costume party. Everyone that bothers to wear a costume has selected to dress up as the Devil. Lee learns from Shep that Corlis has been writing letters to prisoners and orders Shep to produce the letters. The entire family takes part in reading and ridiculing the content of the letters. Corlis appears in a nurse uniform, retrieves her letters, and announces that she will leave the house. In anger, Corlis tells Lee that her seduction of Smokey was a success and that is how she got the money for her uniform. Smokey enters during this confrontation is hurt that Lee would believe he would have an affair with her daughter. Smokey enters the house to pack his things and leave. Lee learns that the seduction did not occur and orders each of her children to go

inside and make things right for her and Smokey. They each refuse and make their final stand to their mother. As the children leave, only Lee and Dixon remain. Lee congratulates herself on what a wonderful job she has done raising her children and as she moves towards the house vows to make things right with Smokey. Ms. Mayer's final note is that a moonlit, star filled sky appears over the house as Lee and Dixon enter it. This final call to the artificial, make believe world of the fifties cemented a design approach in my mind.

Ultimately I feel The Chemistry of Change is a throw back to those innocent times that only truly exist in our minds. As the absurdity of the script progressed for me that ideal sitcom home of the fifties began to warp in my mind. This was the visual that I carried with me before design meetings began with Mr. Winkler.

CHAPTER 2

MAY 2001 – THE FIRST MEETING

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present the facts of the first meeting Mr. Winkler and I had to discuss the script for The Chemistry of Change. This meeting occurred at Serano's restaurant. Initial ideas and thoughts were presented at this meeting.

LUNCH AT SERANO'S

After reading the play, I set up a meeting with Mr. Winkler to discuss it. We both felt this was important since neither of us would be in Baton Rouge for the summer. The hope was that if we had an initial conversation about the script before the end of the semester we could communicate over the summer with any thoughts and ideas we might have on the show. This lunch meeting took place at Serano's Mexican Restaurant. The spring semester was still in session and we both had shop commitments so the meeting was limited to one hour.

I arrived at the meeting carrying a book that I hoped would become the basis of my design. Mr. Winkler and I made the usual small talk and ordered our lunch. When we began a discussion of the script, the first thing I asked was if he saw the environment as a realistic one. To my relief the answer was "no". Mr. Winkler indicated his desire that the setting should reflect the eccentric characters that populate the script. It was at this point that I revealed the book I had brought. California Crazy & Beyond, by Jim Heimann, is a concise collection of the roadside vernacular architecture that dominated Southern California in the nineteen twenties through the nineteen forties. This "crazy" architecture includes such works as a building resembling a dog that is actually a diner and a giant shoe that is actually a small market. I felt that this approach to the design of our show would not only be fun from a comedic point of view, but would be indicative of nineteen fifties California. The only concern I had for this approach to the show was the time period. The play is set in the nineteen fifties and the text indicates that the family has lived in the house for an extended period of time. The script also indicates that the home is in desperate need of repair: at the top of the second act the adult children are working on home repair. If this setting were based on architecture from the twenties or thirties then perhaps it would be hard to believe that a structure that was ten to fifteen years old could be in such disrepair. I justified this approach to myself and later to Mr. Winkler by thinking of the house as a place that one of Lee's many husbands had built for her. Perhaps one of her husbands had tried to get her out of the abortion business by setting her up in another vocation. This idea of a husband building or working on the house was later expanded before the final design was approved.

Mr. Winkler seemed very receptive to this approach. Throughout our lunch we continued to peruse the California Crazy book. Almost every page we turned to inspired a conversation about a symbol relevant to the meaning of the show. The one image that

we kept returning to was the “shoe” building. The symbolism of the shoe house for The Chemistry of Change is obvious. “There was an old lady who lived in a shoe; She had so many children she didn’t know what to do.” This “old lady” is indeed the character of “Lee” in the script. At this point I had some reservations about putting such an obvious symbol on the stage. It would be too easy. I did not express this to Mr. Winkler at the time, as I did not want to stifle the creative process.

In addition to the “shoe” building, the other image that Mr. Winkler dwelled on was a statue of a giant man. In the thirties and forties, these giant figures were used to sell everything from cars to burritos. There are several of these giant signs still in existence today. The symbolism of a giant man overlooking the house on our set is an obvious choice; representative of the trail of men that had flown in and out of Lee’s life always leaving her alone, not having felt loved. A “giant man” advertisement could easily have symbolized the ideal man just over the horizon. Once again, I found the idea intriguing but was put off by the obviousness of it.

We also discussed a flow for the show. Mr. Winkler indicated that he wanted each of the three locations listed in the script to be indicated by three scenic units. This meant that Lee would have a physical house, Baron would deliver his monologue at a hospital, and Smokey would have a “Hell Hole.” Mr. Winkler also suggested that he would like to see several painted drops in the show to indicate movement from one location to another. Although he was not specific about what these drops might be, I agreed that I would give them some thought and do some research. I really appreciated the idea of approaching The Chemistry of Change as a drop show since it would be scenically indicative of the nineteen fifties time period. During the fifties musicals dominated Broadway, most of these musicals required a different location for each scene in the script. These shifts in scene were usually accomplished with a bevy of flown backdrops. By approaching The Chemistry of Change as a drop show, we also established that we did not want to stop the show for scenic shifts at any point. The scenes should flow from one right into another. On this point we were both in total agreement.

We made one definite decision at this first meeting. The stage floor in the Shaver Theatre had been configured for the Louisiana State University Theatre production of The King Stag, designed by Professor Nels Anderson. This configuration covered the orchestra pit opening and provided a series of steps from the stage to the auditorium floor. These steps spanned the entire width of the stage. I felt that this configuration would work well for The Chemistry of Change. By leaving the stage in the same configuration we would not only save money in the budget for other things, but also save construction time in the shop that normally goes into installing a new stage lay out. Mr. Winkler agreed that the configuration would work well for him and his blocking of the show.

At this point I suggested what I thought my concept for the show over the summer would be. I told Mr. Winkler that I would like to take the show as far as I could creatively without worrying about what was too obvious or impossible to achieve on our

budget. After reaching a creative limit we could then bring the show back to the level we wanted. All this meant was that Lee's house might be shaped like a shoe and there might be a giant fiberglass man with his back turned to us in the distance; these images may or may not be rendered literally. They would, however, serve us as a starting point with nothing holding back the creative process. Mr. Winkler agreed.

At the end of this first meeting we agreed not to let our work stop over the summer. With phone, fax, e-mail, and scanning technology available to us, I would easily be able to share my research and ideas with him and even though we were several hundred miles apart we could continue the process. I sent Mr. Winkler several research images in mid June of 2001 via e-mail. I requested that he respond to these images with any thoughts or ideas they might inspire. After several weeks I finally received a response. In essence what he told me was, "it's the summer and I don't want to think about it now." I found this to be very disappointing and discouraging. Although I did not attempt any contact with Mr. Winkler for the rest of the summer, I utilized the time to do more research and develop my own ideas about the show.

CHAPTER 3

AUGUST 2001 – RETURN AFTER SUMMER

INTRODUCTION

This chapter chronicles events of the month of August 2001. It was during this time that a final scenic approach to the show was established. The first section relays an idea proposed by Mr. Winkler concerning a visual integration of the publicity elements of the show with the scenic design. The final section chronicles the scenic development based on research and conversations with Mr. Winkler.

VISUAL INTEGRATION

When I returned to the Louisiana State University campus in mid-August of 2001, I was greeted with several frantic messages from Mr. Winkler. Suddenly there was a great concern that we had not spoken over the summer concerning the show. He was already working on the show with his stage manager, Ellie Sturgill. When I contacted him, his first question to me was if I'd like to integrate all visual elements of the show with my scenic design. These visual elements would include the audition notice, all publicity artwork, and the program. I reacted positively to this approach and immediately asked Mr. Winkler for any ideas or thoughts he had on the subject. His only comment was that he would like all materials to contain an image of the devil to represent the character of Smokey and his "Hell Hole."

I began searching for classic images of the devil to fulfill his request. I found several public domain images that I liked on the World Wide Web. The image I felt most represented the play contained a devil surrounded by what appears to be the souls of several women. I printed out an assortment of images and included the title of the show in various fonts for Mr. Winkler's perusal. Due to the fact that Mr. Winkler and I felt the time period of the play was vastly important to the audience's interpretation of the show, I played with the notion of having the program printed as a Long Beach newspaper with news articles and advertisements from the decade. This would not only emphasize the time period of the piece, but would help in transporting the audience to Southern California. Armed with my images and program idea I met with Mr. Winkler and Ms. Sturgil.

Ms. Sturgil arrived at the meeting with the audition poster already completed. It was a standard issue poster, which was exactly what Mr. Winkler had told me he did not want. It was done and that was all that seemed to matter. I went ahead and presented the images of the devil I had found to Mr. Winkler. He reacted very positively to these images as well as to the program idea. He selected the devil with the female souls as his favorite. It was at this point I made it clear that I would not be responsible for laying out the program or the poster but would serve as a consultant. I also stated that I would provide any artwork necessary to bring our ideas to fruition. When questioned about my reasoning, I informed Mr. Winkler that with the amount of work that I would be required

to provide the shop for the scenic elements I simply would not have the time to make a commitment to the publicity issues. I also informed him that we had a publicity person assigned to the show who would be compensated for his work. I felt I was being more than generous with my offer to provide artwork and supervision to the process. Mr. Winkler agreed and the meeting was over.

The image of the devil with the female souls was placed on the show's callboard. This is the only place where the image was ever used. The idea of a complete integration of all the visual elements was never mentioned again.

SCENIC DEVELOPMENT

The late August meetings Mr. Winkler and I had about the scenery focused primarily on the California Crazy image of the building shaped like a shoe. I produced several rough thumbnails of a stage dwelling based on this shape. These thumbnails were a literal interpretation of the research images. Another idea that had developed for me over the summer had involved an oil strike that occurred in Long Beach in the early years of the century. I envisioned Lee's back yard surrounded by deserted oil derricks and pumps. These "dinosaur" remains would provide a perfect symbol to appear alongside Lee's family by representing a desertion by the father figure in the children's lives; a symbol of promise for the future abandoned to sit and rot. The more I worked with these two images, the more I was convinced they were not the right direction to pursue with the scenery. The image of the old lady who lived in a shoe would have been a sledgehammer on the heads of the audience members. The idea of the deserted oil paraphernalia might have confused the audience into thinking the play was set in Texas or, worse, Louisiana. The organic shape of the shoe also raised many questions in my mind in terms of budget, time, and work force in our shop. I simply did not believe we could do it justice. Mr. Winkler was still excited by the image of the shoe and I found myself trying to live up to the "take it as far as we can" approach without stifling creativity.

As far as the other scenic elements were concerned, Mr. Winkler informed me that the "rock" mentioned in the script description of the scenery was a necessity for his vision and blocking. He felt that the symbolism of this hard immovable object was important to the show. I felt the rock was interesting scenically but would prove problematic when we reached a scene shift discussion. A rather lengthy dialogue about the rock ensued. In the end, Mr. Winkler felt the idea of a foreign element included on the set would be representative of the character of Smokey; an object that didn't belong but was ultimately accepted by the family because it was there. I conceded to this symbol and the idea of the foreign object would be instrumental in the final paint treatment of the rock.

Mr. Winkler continued with the idea of having a number of drops in the show serving the sole purpose of moving from one location to another. One drop that he specifically mentioned was a "gambling" drop. This drop would be designated for the character of Baron. His idea was that this drop would include images of dice, cards, martini glasses, and other gambling icons. My initial reaction was that while it was an

interesting notion and appropriate to the character I could not envision where the drop might be used during the show. Mr. Winkler suggested that the drop could be used as a transition for Baron's movement from the recovery hospital to his arrival back at Lee's home. We had already reached the conclusion that the recovery hospital would be a drop. I expressed concern that the "gambling" drop would slow down the scene shift and there was not a place for the drop to be used a second time. Mr. Winkler still wanted to explore the drop and I agreed to research images for it. The visual image for the hospital drop was not discussed at this time.

Another drop that we discussed was the "Hell Hole" for the character of Smokey. I discussed with Mr. Winkler my thought that this setting should be distinctively different from the rest of the scenic elements. I felt that the "Hell Hole" should look as if it were of a different world than Lee's backyard. The carnival location of "Hell Hole" and the mystery of Smokey's character made this a logical conclusion. Mr. Winkler concurred with this approach and expressed his desire that this setting occupy the entire stage. Another idea discussed was that the "Hell Hole" should be an ominous presence to all the characters that encounter it. Mr. Winkler and I also discussed the need for the "Hell Hole" to include some special effects. Hypnotic eyes, a "tongue" ramp, pyrotechnics, black light, and artificial flames were all discussed as possibilities for this setting.

The final discussion of drops during this month was what came to be called the "show drop". This drop was conceived to frame the show at the beginning, intermission, and end. The sole purpose of the "show drop" was to prepare the audience for the time and place of the show. It was my original intent for this "doorway to the show" be based on images from the great American roadway Route Sixty-six. The book, Fun Along the Road – American Tourist Attractions by John Margolies, provides many images of some of the weird and bizarre attractions that populated the highways during the forties and fifties. It was my feeling that these images would be indicative of the time period, and would prepare the audience for the journey they were taking. Also I felt the quirkiness of some of the attractions were a perfect fit for Lee's family. Some of the attractions I wanted to include: "Monkey Jungle," a reference to how living in this environment must have felt at times; "Snake Farm," a reference to the behavior of the family; and "The Wonder Spot," what Lee encounters with Smokey. Mr. Winkler liked these ideas but added that he felt the "show drop" should have some three-dimensional quality to it. My solution to adding some dimension was to make the drop individual cut outs of the images and suspend each one from a line set. Furthering this idea, some of the images would be painted with black-light sensitive paint and placed on a line set further upstage than the others. The idea was the black-light effect on the upstage images would provide additional depth and stylistically replicate the neon that was commonly used in signage of the fifties.

Mr. Winkler and I discussed the Shaver Theatre at this point. The proscenium arch in this space is a series of art deco plaster designs offset from each other creating an accordion wall separating the audience from the plaster line. If scenery is placed too far upstage, the proscenium arch can appear as a "cave entrance". The further upstage scenery is on the Shaver stage the further the actors are from the audience, a fact visually

multiplied by the “accordion” arch. Also, there are many acoustical considerations involved in the placement of the actors on this stage. I indicated to Mr. Winkler my desire that we place the scenery, and thus the action, as far downstage as possible. Mr. Winkler agreed.

CHAPTER 4

SEPTEMBER 2001 - FINALIZING PLANS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide an account of the events that occurred during the month of September 2001, which led to the tough decisions that had to be made by Mr. Winkler and myself to insure that the scenery would meet our needs while not over-extending the scene shop or the show budget. A description of the final design is also included.

SEPTEMBER ELEVENTH

The tragic events of September eleventh took everyone by surprise. I found myself asking what was the point of doing this show or anything else for that matter. The grief I felt for the victims of the attacks put everything for me on hold and in limbo for several days. Although the question of continuing with the production was never raised, the feeling that things were not the same prevailed. Because the play was not set in the present, the terrorist issues would not have to be addressed by the director or designers in a literal way. I personally used my work on The Chemistry of Change as an escape from the images of pain and loss repeated daily on television. Ultimately the attacks did not change our approach to the show. Although things will never be the same from this date on, I am proud that as a production team we continued our work to make this the best show we could.

TOUGH DECISIONS

In the early weeks of September, the pressure to make the scenic plans final was beginning to mount. Mr. Winkler and I had numerous meetings each week to discuss the individual scenic elements. Mr. Winkler also conducted auditions and cast the play. Rehearsals were scheduled to begin prior to the ground plan being finalized. Under normal circumstances this would prove very problematic; however, Mr. Winkler actually began rehearsals earlier than normal. The purpose of the early rehearsal period was to allow training time for the actors. In fact, the actors worked for several weeks before turning to the task of blocking the script.

Several decisions had to be made concerning the scenery for the show. The first item was the number of drops necessary for the production. At one point the list of drops Mr. Winkler wished to see in the show included a “show drop,” a “Hell Hole” drop, a “hospital” drop, a “gambling” drop, and a backdrop. The scenic budget for The Chemistry of Change was set at twenty-five hundred dollars. The price to purchase one muslin drop was approximately eight hundred dollars. This was prior to any painting. I also questioned where these drops could be laid out for painting. Mr. Winkler agreed that he might be willing to give up the Shaver stage for a limited time to paint the drops on that surface. I explained to Mr. Winkler that in addition to the prohibitive cost of purchasing five drops, I alone did not have the time to paint them. Earlier in the

semester, I discovered that a scenic artist would be hired for the Swine Palace production of The Tavern. Swine Palace is a professional regional company that produces in association with Louisiana State University Theatre; all shops and personnel are shared. Realizing that the paint needs for The Chemistry of Change would be greater than those of The Tavern; I approached Patrick Acompora, our Production Manager, about assigning myself as the scenic artist for The Tavern and utilizing the hired scenic artist for The Chemistry of Change. For some reason Professor Acompora refused to entertain this idea. Finally, Mr. Winkler and I agreed to cut the muslin drops. The decision had already been made to construct the “show drop” out of a series of cutouts. It was now decided that the “Hell Hole” drop would be constructed out of luan skinned flats, the “gambling” drop would be cut, and the cyclorama would be used as the backdrop. We would still need a “hospital” drop to establish location for Baron’s monologue.

I still had no desire to spend a third of the total scenery budget of the show on a drop that would be on stage for less than fifteen minutes. Professor Acompora had informed me earlier that the theatre owned a white scrim. My thought was that the white scrim could be used as the “hospital” drop. I suggested to Mr. Winkler that we could apply a red cross to the white scrim to represent the hospital. Another option discussed was that we might locate an old drop and paint it white with a red cross.

During this period of rapid decisions, Mr. Winkler finally agreed that the literal interpretation of the shoe building on stage might be too much. I had already begun researching houses of the period and was trying to interpret them as subtle shoe shapes. I located the book, Palm Springs Weekend – The Architecture and Design of a Mid-Century Oasis by Alan Hess and Andrew Danish, which contained numerous images of houses constructed in the late forties and fifties in the Palm Springs area. Although these structures were in Palm Springs and our play was set in Long Beach, the structures could be identified by most people as indicative of Southern California. The structures were also immediately identifiable as nineteen fifties architecture. When I shared some of these images with Mr. Winkler, he shared my enthusiasm. The image of the shoe soon faded from our discussions.

The largest obstacle to using the Palm Springs Weekend book as inspiration for the design of the house was that as with the images of the shoe building, the play was set in the nineteen fifties and the dwelling was to be old and in disrepair. This would mean that the structure would have to have been built in a much earlier decade. I suggested to Mr. Winkler that we accept the notion that Lee had lived in this house for a long period of time and that any number of her previous husbands had contributed some portion of the house during his time there. I described the dwelling as a giant jigsaw puzzle in which none of the pieces really fit well together. This image became the basis for the stylization of the set. I quickly began drawing up a ground plan.

Even though we had cut several drops from the show, every drop that we did use would push the scenery for the backyard of Lee’s house further upstage. The other locations were only seen briefly. Complicating the problem was the fact that a number of the line sets in the Shaver Theatre were broken and some are located within inches of

electrics, which prohibits their use for flying scenery because of their close proximity to the lighting instruments.

Early in the process, Mr. Winkler and I had agreed that any furniture used on the Lee's backyard set had to be permanent. In other words, at no time did we want to see an actor or crew person move furniture on or off the stage. With the drops and the exterior of the house for the backyard there was not going to be enough room on the stage floor for everything we wanted. Cuts had to be made.

The first thing we cut was the double layered "show drop". This doubling would not just require two line sets, but a third to allow black-lights to be installed to illuminate the second layer. The solution was to combine the regular images with the black-light images on the same baton. The black-light effect would be accomplished with conventional stage lighting. The next cut was the "hospital" drop. A white scrim could not be located for this drop nor was there a previously used drop for us to paint. If we wanted a "hospital" drop we would have to purchase the muslin or build luan frames. My solution was a simple wagon with a muslin covered flat attached to represent the "hospital" and confine the playing area for the actor in that scene. With the drop cuts, the allowance of clearance space for the electrics, and a decision to place the "rock" downstage in front of everything, we had enough room for Lee's house and backyard.

The placement of the "rock" in the downstage right area not only saved valuable space on the upstage side of the proscenium but provided a motivation for the actors to move downstage during the backyard scenes. It was my intention to provide a similar motivation for movement on the stage left side. Mr. Winkler opposed this idea. The reason for his opposition was that if it were a piece of furniture it would need to be moved for the other scenes. He had no problem with the rock being there during the other scenes because he appreciated the comment it made on immobility and weightiness. I felt not placing anything downstage left was a mistake not only with motivation but also with balance.

FINAL DESIGN

As I worked to finalize the ground plan and look of the show, I produced several visual elements. A quick, disposable trash model was made of the house exterior. I took a digital photo of this model and experimented with coloring in Corel Photo House. I also produced a rendering of the back yard set. Finally a half inch white model was made of the structure. The final structure was to consist of seven angular walls joined together to form the façade of the house. One of the walls would have a false panel built in that would be replaced during the intermission to allow the characters to literally paint the house during the home improvement scene. A gable appeared at the top of the stage left side, which had a circular window cut into it. This raised window would be accessible to the actors. Each wall was finished with clapboard, paneling, or flagstone. A circular, planked deck flanked the façade. This deck was raked at two different points giving it a warped appearance. At each side of the house, a wall made from decorative concrete blocks trailed off. Two large metal beams protruded from the house façade and joined at

a slanted metal beam further out from the deck providing a roof like structure. The slanted metal beam would be planted in a series of concrete pads creating a stair step effect that could be used as a sitting area. These concrete pads would eventually be called the pods. A palm tree jutted out of the deck planking and pushed through the line created by the metal beams. A storage shack was placed upstage right to provide balance to the house structure.

At this point no furniture was on the ground plan. Usually when I work with a director I will sketch in furniture locations but then allow the blocking tell me where a chair or other piece of furniture is needed. As the backyard set became stylized Mr. Winkler and I decided that it was necessary for the furniture elements to be stylized as well. I concluded that we could develop a look for a piece of furniture for each of the characters and use the furniture that was necessary for his blocking.

The large Styrofoam rock was to be placed in the downstage right position. The rock had to be sturdy enough to support several actors sitting on it, jumping on it, and, at the request of Mr. Winkler, have a built in ashtray.

The “Hell Hole” remained a drop. The image of the classic medieval Hell Mouth was in my mind, though Mr. Winkler and I never directly discussed that image. The devil head shaped drop was to have an opening in the mouth with a tongue ramp that rolled out at the appropriate time. The eyes were to be painted with hypnotic swirls and motorized to revolve. Mr. Winkler also requested that the eyes be functional in opening and closing. He wanted the devil to wink at the audience and appear as sleeping when the “Hell Hole” is closed in the second act. I resisted the winking eye due to the fact that the same trick had been used on the head statue constructed for the Spring 2001 production of The King Stag. I did not want to repeat another designer’s work. Reluctantly I agreed that the devil could wink at the audience. The space needs that necessitated the drop cuts eventually required the tongue ramp to be cut. The devil head was flanked on two sides by wagons with “flame walls” attached and flash pots attached on the upstage sides. Upstage of the face facade another “flame wall” drop backed the scene. A “Hell Hole” sign was attached directly to the devil head shaped drop.

The “hospital” drop was now a wagon with an angular flat attached. The inspiration for this look was a hospital screen. The flat was covered with muslin and would have a red cross painted on it. Mr. Winkler requested that the flat be attached in the middle of the wagon so that Baron could put his cigarette out on it and not have the crushed butt remain on stage.

The show drop unit was also ultimately revised. The tourist attraction images from the highway were replaced with more generic icons of the fifties. A drive-in movie sign, coffee house sign, atomic symbols, and others were incorporated into the final look.

With a final ground plan set, I again expressed to Mr. Winkler my concern with the house façade being placed so far upstage. Mr. Winkler acknowledged my concerns

and assured me that he was addressing the situation with the acting style he was directing for this production. I had no recourse but to trust Mr. Winkler's instinct.

With these plans set, Mr. Winkler was now free to begin blocking. I was now able to begin drawing up the plans I would provide to Christopher Wood, our Technical Director. Mr. Wood in turn would produce the working drawings needed for the scene shop to construct the show.

After two weeks of Mr. Winkler using rehearsal time for his actor training, blocking rehearsals were set to begin. The director had used the two weeks instructing the actors with Suzuki and View Points technique. According to Mr. Winkler, this training was to assist the actors in "getting used to filling the auditorium and not just the stage." All the designers were invited to the first rehearsal for the purpose of presenting their concepts and ideas to the cast. As a designer, I feel this is an important element in the process. After the presentations, there was a brief break at which time many of the actors expressed their excitement over the designs. In addition to informing the actors of the concept of the show, the meeting also is generally good for the designer's ego.

CHAPTER 5

OCTOBER 2001 – THE HOME STRETCH

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will include the events that occurred in the month of October relating to the scenic design of The Chemistry of Change. Included will be a section relating the questioning of the placement of the house façade upstage of the proscenium arch; a discussion of the selection of the color pallet for the production; and a detailed account of the events that occurred while the scene shop was in the build process.

A DIFFICULT TWO DAYS

After finally seeing the beginnings of the set on the Shaver Stage, my advisor, Professor Nels Anderson, approached me with a concern that the house façade was too far upstage of the proscenium arch. I explained to Professor Anderson that I shared his concern; however, due to the number of flown scenic elements in the show the placement of the façade was a necessity. Professor Anderson then began to suggest that I remedy this situation by placing the façade unit on casters and rolling it up and down the stage as necessary. I responded that at one point Mr. Winkler and I had discussed that possibility, but with the decking and palm tree units it would prove costly and add to the amount of time for the scenic transitions. I also explained to Mr. Anderson that I had already had this discussion with Mr. Winkler and voiced the same concerns that he was now voicing to me. I told him of Mr. Winkler's assurance that the problem was being addressed in the rehearsal process.

Professor Anderson then informed me that he would have to discuss the problem with Professor John Dennis. When I inquired why Professor Dennis would be involved in this discussion, I was told that Professor Dennis was the Artistic Director of Louisiana State University Theatre and must be informed of this problem. I was highly offended by this. My response was that if Professor Dennis was the Artistic Director of our theatre then perhaps Professor Dennis should attend our design meetings or at least production meetings. I further stated that I did not appreciate that I had been working on this show since the beginning of the semester and concern for it was only now being shown. My feeling was that at this point people should be more concerned about whether the show would be completed as drawn than with making changes to the existing design. Professor Anderson then informed me that his true intent of speaking with Professor Dennis was so that when Professor Dennis saw the problem he would know the full situation. It is common for a designer to be criticized for a decision that is beyond his or her control. In other words, Professor Anderson wanted to make sure I was not blamed for what he felt was an obvious mistake. I appreciated the concern but still felt no need to apologize for the design or place the blame on someone else.

The next morning Dr. Michael Tick, our Producing Director, approached me with the question "How is Chemistry going?" When I replied positively he asked, "Is it too

far upstage?” My reply was that yes it was further upstage than Mr. Winkler and myself would have liked but Mr. Winkler was addressing the issue in his blocking. It was now clear that everyone now understood the situation and the issue was never discussed again.

COLOR SELECTION

Selecting the colors for the scenery for The Chemistry of Change was perhaps the easiest selection process I have ever encountered. The color scheme of the “Hell Hole” was a given; it had to be red, yellow, and orange. I chose a green accent for the devil head’s collar.

The original idea for the color scheme of the house façade was a primary color palette. These primary colors would enhance the stylized look and further the jigsaw puzzle appearance. The red, yellow, and green approach would also make reference to the adolescent actions of the occupants of the house. After a test elevation of these colors, I determined that given the warm colors of the “Hell Hole” the best scheme for the façade would be a cool palette. The warm and cool palettes would create a contrast between the two locations. Green, purple, blue, and an accent of yellow became the façade palette.

I had always planned for the hospital to be white with a red cross painted on it. After the terrorist attack on September eleventh and the role the American Red Cross played in the recovery and aftermath, Mr. Winkler and I determined it would cause confusion to include a red cross. The hospital wagon would remain white and be framed by an out line of chrome.

The rock was to be painted as a natural rock. This would be achieved by using a gray scale pallet. The natural treatment was changed during technical rehearsals because Mr. Winkler felt it was too natural in relation to the rest of the paint treatments. His request was that it be retreated as a foreign rock, like a meteorite. The original color palette was retained for the new treatment.

THE BUILD

The drawings for the show were turned into Mr. Christopher Wood, the Technical Director, a week later than was posted on the production calendar. This delay was due to several factors. The first of these factors was the fact that we had put off the decision to cut a number of the drops until the last minute. By not making this decision sooner, the exact dimensions and location of the house façade could not be determined. The second reason for the delay was that The Chemistry of Change would mark the first time that I produced any drawings for a shop using computer aided drafting, the AutoCAD computer program. The delay was discussed and approved by Mr. Wood due to the fact that the scene shop was under immense pressure to complete work on the Swine Palace production of The Tavern. In the Louisiana State University Theatre production system it is always a disadvantage to a designer to have a show follow on the heels of another show, particularly if you are a student designer and the show you follow is a Swine

Palace production. I do not believe that this is an intentional slight but it is a regular occurrence.

I enjoyed producing the drawings for The Chemistry of Change in the AutoCAD program. By delivering the drawings to the Technical Director in this format the process of turning out working drawings for the shop was expedited. With the computer-generated drawings, the working drawings are literally lifted from the designer elevations without having to manually input the information from scratch. Even with the advantage of the computer-generated drawings the production time devoted to The Chemistry of Change quickly began to evaporate. The amount of time devoted to the production of The Tavern continued to grow at the expense of our show. As the designer, who is also a graduate assistant in the scene shop, I did my best to keep my mouth shut and trust that the shop would be able to get our show completed on time. At last The Tavern opened and now the focus would be on The Chemistry of Change.

When a Technical Director approaches me about what my priorities are in terms of what I would like to see built first, my usual reaction is anything that will affect the actors and their blocking. This was not the case with this show. Due to the size and amount of painting required, I requested that the “Hell Hole” devil head drop be built first. This would allow me to utilize the Shaver stage to lay luan sheets out and paint it on the floor. If it were hung on the baton prior to painting, the paint time would at least be doubled. In order for the piece to be built, I would have to cartoon the figure on luan sheets. I asked the shop to lie out sheets of luan so that I could complete the layout. I was asked at this time if the shop could build the frames and attach the luan prior to my lay out. My response was “no” since this would increase the difficulty of cartooning the shape. When I arrived to do the cartooning, I discovered that the frames had already been built and the luan attached. This would seem not to be an issue; however, with the sheets already attached to the frames, walking on the piece is prohibited. This increased the time it took to cartoon the piece.

After the piece was cartooned and the shape cut out, the next step was to paint it. The “Hell Hole” was divided into four separate units that would not be assembled until it was hung on the baton. This meant that after it was painted and hung the seams would have to be patched with joint compound and the paint retouched. The mechanics for the hypnotic eyes and closing eyelids would be added later. The flame walls and wagons were constructed as the head was being painted.

The deck platform was the next unit constructed. Because the deck was raked at two different points, the layout for this piece was complicated. Mr. Wood and I first laid the unit out in the AutoCAD program. From this layout we constructed a computer generated three-dimensional model. Once the model was complete, we simply picked points for a series of trusses to support the surface. These trusses were constructed as individual units and then skinned with three quarter inch plywood for the surface structure. In order to save money and still create the look that I wanted, I requested that the deck be completed with planking that had been manufactured for The Tavern set.

Two step units were added to the deck unit to allow access from the stage floor; these step units were pulled from stock.

The wall units for the house façade were constructed as hard flats surfaced with quarter inch luan and then faced with luan clapboards, paneling, or Styrofoam flagstone. The two flagstone units were constructed first since I would need to carve the foam to look like flagstone. The construction of these units began the same week as the Louisiana State University fall break. This meant that for at least two days the shop would lose the entire student work force. Mr. Winkler and I agreed to work during the fall break so that construction would not fall behind. The construction of the wall units was to prove very time consuming. Since all of the walls were angled at the top and were joined to other walls at an angle, the entire unit had to be mitered to insure that all seams would match properly. The fall break was used to paint the façade sections. Mr. Wood also informed me at this time that after the break a day would be lost on the build for The Chemistry of Change so the shop could strike The Tavern set. The urgency of the strike was to accommodate the rehearsals for the Swine Palace production of A Christmas Carol. I was not pleased at this development.

When the students returned from the fall break, the one day that was to be devoted to The Tavern strike quickly developed into two. I then had a heated discussion with Mr. Wood expressing my concern that The Chemistry of Change was taking a back seat to the other productions. We had less than four days until the scheduled beginning of technical rehearsals and still did not have one wall standing. Mr. Wood indicated that he understood my concerns but his hands were tied. I brought my concerns to the production meeting that week. Since no one offered an explanation or shared my concerns, they were quickly dismissed.

A push was made to have as much of the scenery in place as possible before the start of technical rehearsals. On the Wednesday prior to the Friday start of technical rehearsals, Mr. Wood, Mr. Winkler, and myself had a meeting to discuss priority needs for the those rehearsals. At this meeting Mr. Winkler made a list of what he felt were the necessary requirements from the actor's point of view. This list included all the scenic elements. At this point Mr. Winkler also informed us that he had not blocked anyone to use the circular window that was in the gable of the façade. Visually I liked the window but ultimately cut it for time considerations. There is nothing unusual or surprising that a director wants everything right now. After this meeting Mr. Wood and I discussed a more realistic approach to a priority list. The walls, door, palm tree trunk, rock, pods, "Hell Hole" drop, flame wall, flame wagons, and "hospital" wagon were the elements I felt were necessary to be there for a successful technical rehearsal. The show drop, palm fronds, devil eyes and lids, shack, and cement block walls could drop to the bottom of the list. The walls for the façade were soon completed and quickly mounted in place. Mr. Wood carved the palm tree trunk from Styrofoam, while I carved the rock from the same material. All of the elements on my list were in place for the first technical rehearsal.

Technical rehearsals ran smoothly. The only point of discussion was the movement of the "Hell Hole" drop and its accompanying flames. Earlier Mr. Winkler

and I had discussed that the first appearance of “Hell Hole” would be a visual event and the second appearance would occur in a black out for a more subtle change since the “Hell Hole” was closed in that scene. The stage manager did a fine job in rehearsing her crew so the change went smoothly. Ultimately Mr. Winkler concluded that the second appearance of “Hell Hole” would replicate the first.

The final week that The Chemistry of Change was in production in the shop can best be described as hell week. The final touches necessary to complete the set comprised a very long list. The mechanics for the devil eye movements and paint notes were the largest concern. Stress on my temper and nerves was further complicated by the fact that production on the set for A Christmas Carol was started before The Chemistry of Change was completed. Once again my show was given the back seat to another.

The last element completed on The Chemistry of Change was the show drop. This had no affect on the actors and the final element was completed on the afternoon of October 25, 2001, opening day. Miraculously the show opened with the majority of my notes completed. As usual I had to force myself to stop and accept the show as a finished product.

CHAPTER 6

VISUAL EVIDENCE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present the visual elements that went into the scenic design of The Chemistry of Change. Included will be some of the early research photos that aided in the development of the concept; thumbnails, renderings and models made of the set; designer drawings and working drawings; and production photographs as evidence of the final product as it appeared on the Shaver stage.

RESEARCH PHOTOGRAPHS

The following images are some of the elements that were pulled from to produce the look of this production. Some of the photographs may contain only a single element that caught my eye as something that could be included in the show. These photographs were viewed as a mere starting point for the director and I to begin discussions.



Fig. 6.1

GIANT MEN OF THE THIRTIES AND FORTIES



Fig. 6.2

A SHOE BUILDING



Fig. 6.3

MOTHER GOOSE PANTRY



Fig. 6.4

DEVIL SELECTED FOR VISUAL INTEGRATION

THUMBNAILS , RENDERINGS, AND MODELS

The following section includes initial doodles and thumbnails of ideas from early discussions with the director. These thumbnails were then developed into renderings of what the final set could look like. Finally a three dimensional white model of the final look of the house façade was constructed and a photograph is included here.

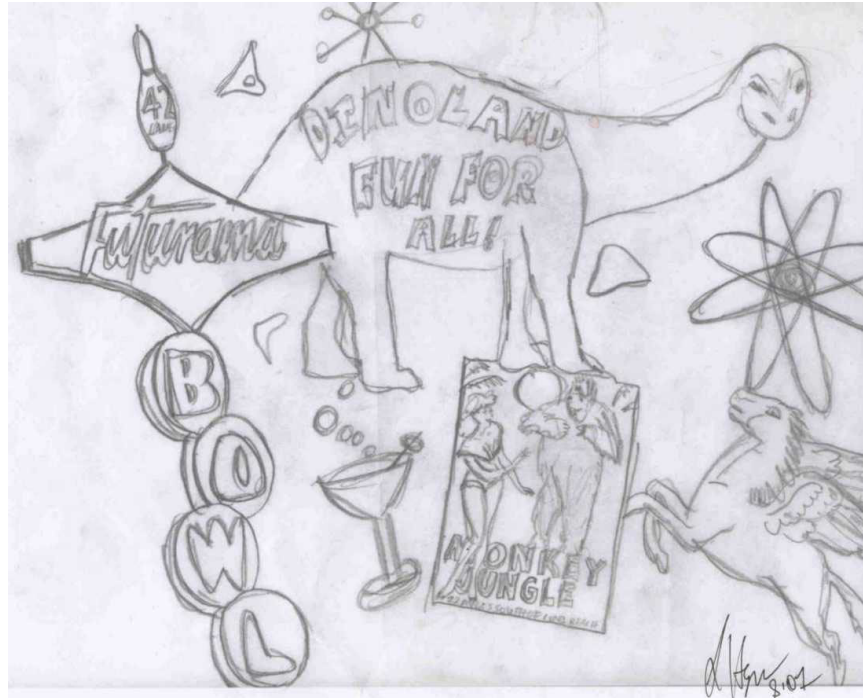


Fig. 6.5

SHOW DROP SKETCH



Fig. 6.6

SHOW DROP COLOR TEST



Fig. 6.7

FINAL SHOW DROP RENDERING

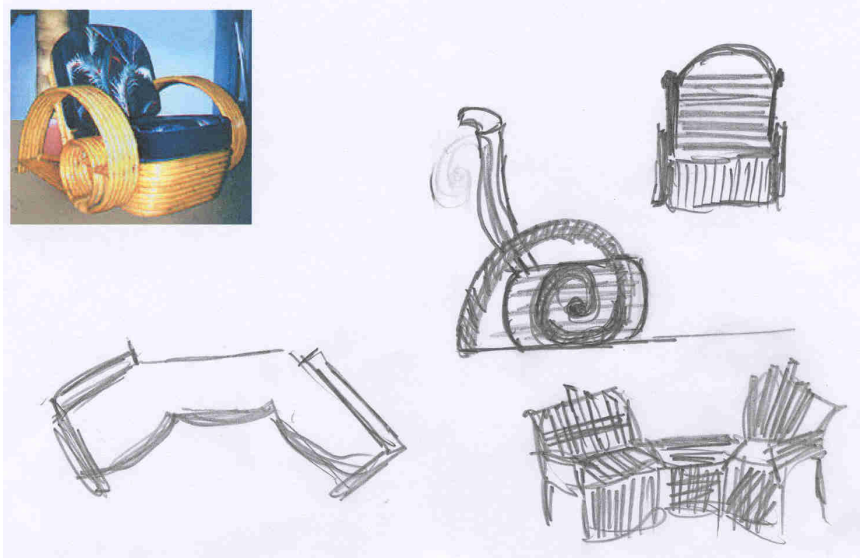


Fig. 6.8

CHAIR STUDIES

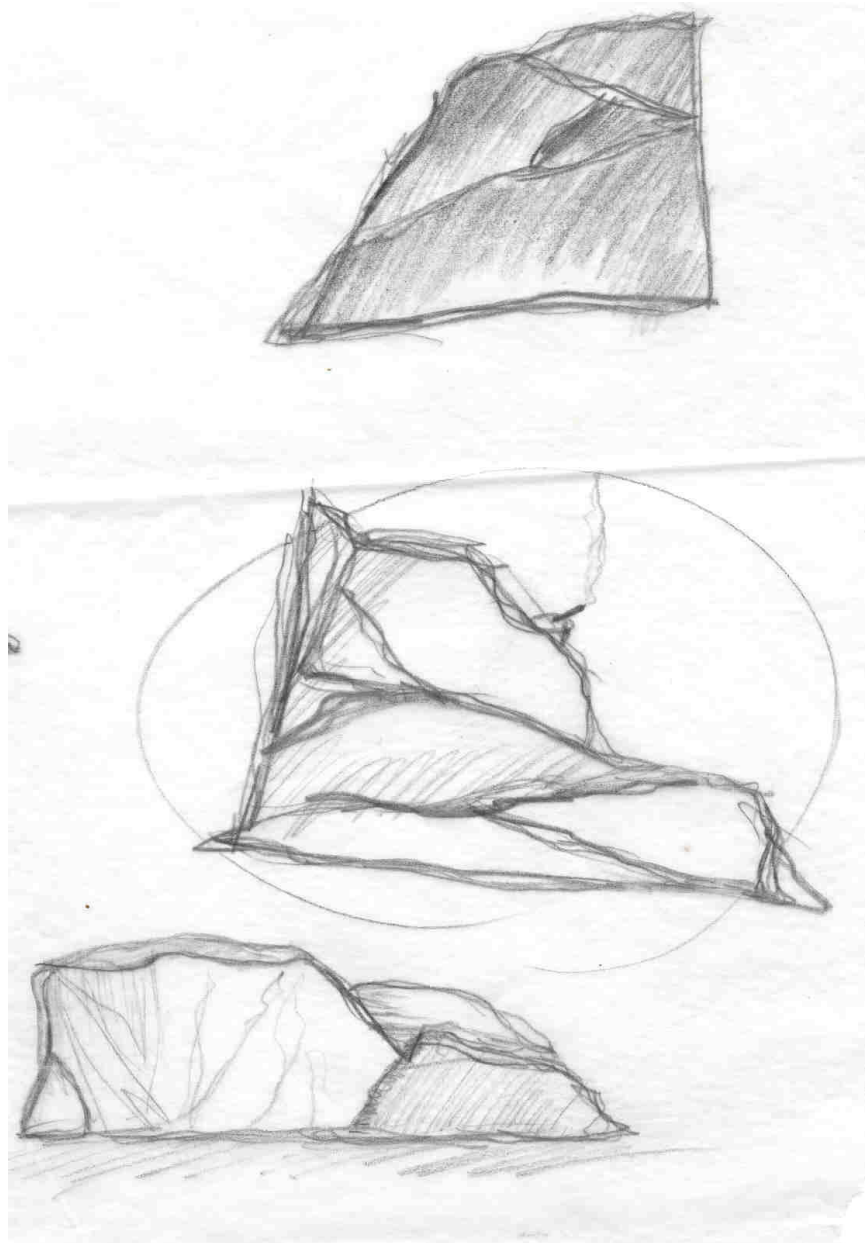


Fig. 6.9

ROCK STUDIES



Fig. 6.10

TRASH MODEL

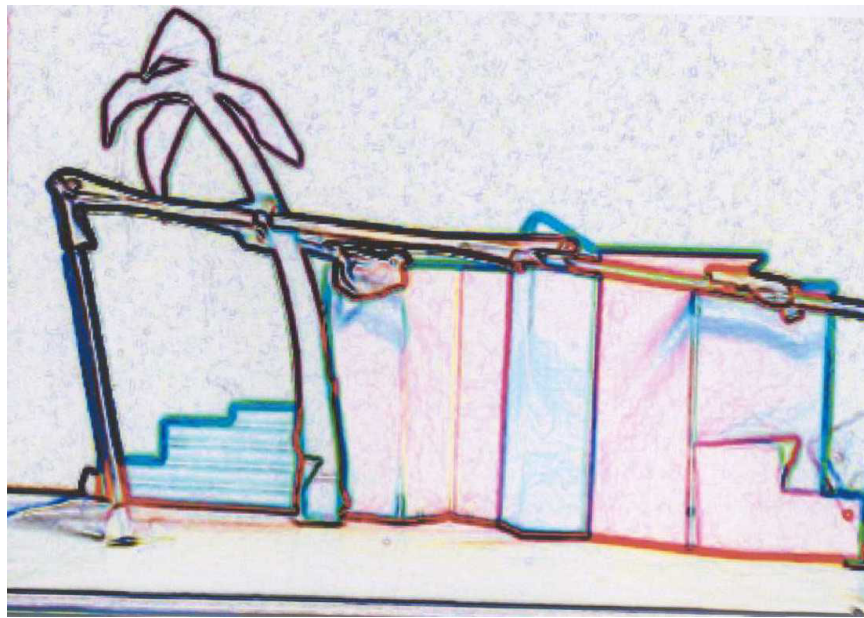


Fig. 6.11

DIGITAL TRASH MODEL COLOR TEST



Fig. 6.12

WHITE MODEL

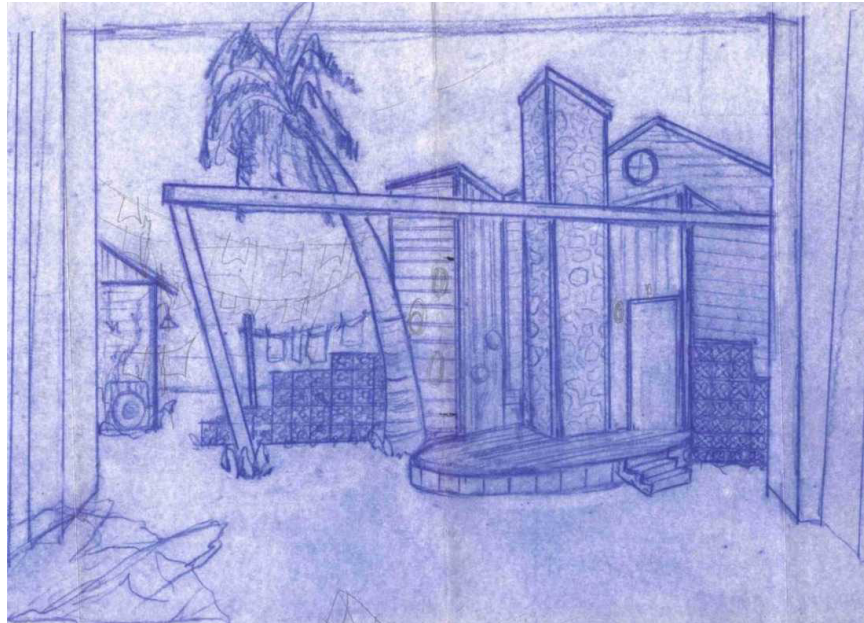


Fig. 6.13

RENDERING



Fig. 6.14

COLOR RENDERING WITH ABANDONED COLOR SCHEME



Fig. 6.15

ABANDONED WARM COLOR SCHEME



Fig. 6.16

FINAL COLOR ELEVATION



Fig. 6.17

FIRST DEVIL HEAD SKETCH



Fig. 6.18

HELL HOLE SKETCH



Fig. 6.19

HELL HOLE COLOR TEST

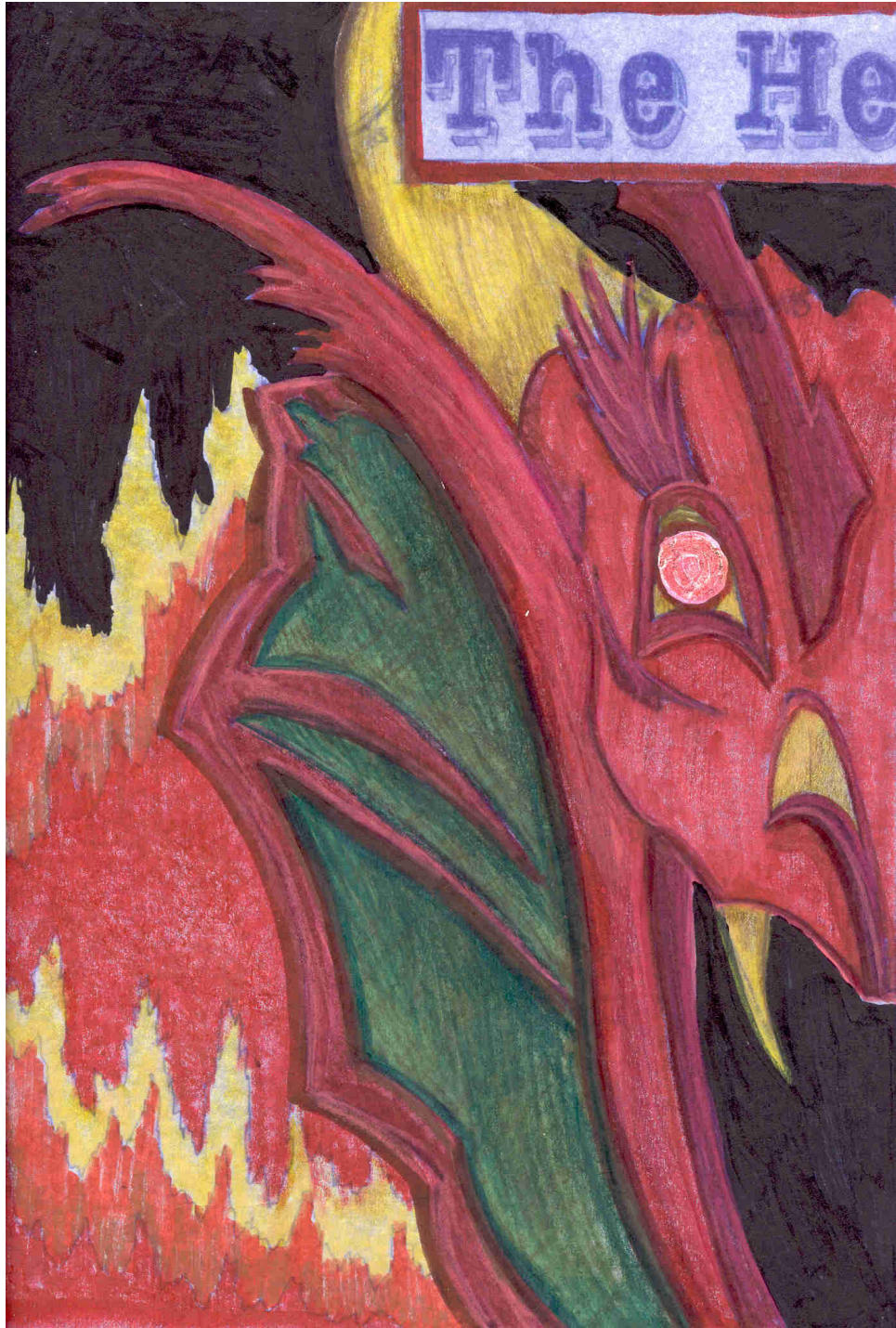


Fig. 6.20

FINAL DEVIL HEAD RENDERING

DESIGNER DRAWINGS AND WORKING DRAWINGS

The following section contains the drawings I produced to give to the Technical Director to build the show. I have also included the working drawings that were produced and given directly to the shop for production of the scenery. In the event of a remount of this production, the entire set could be physically reproduced from the following drawings.

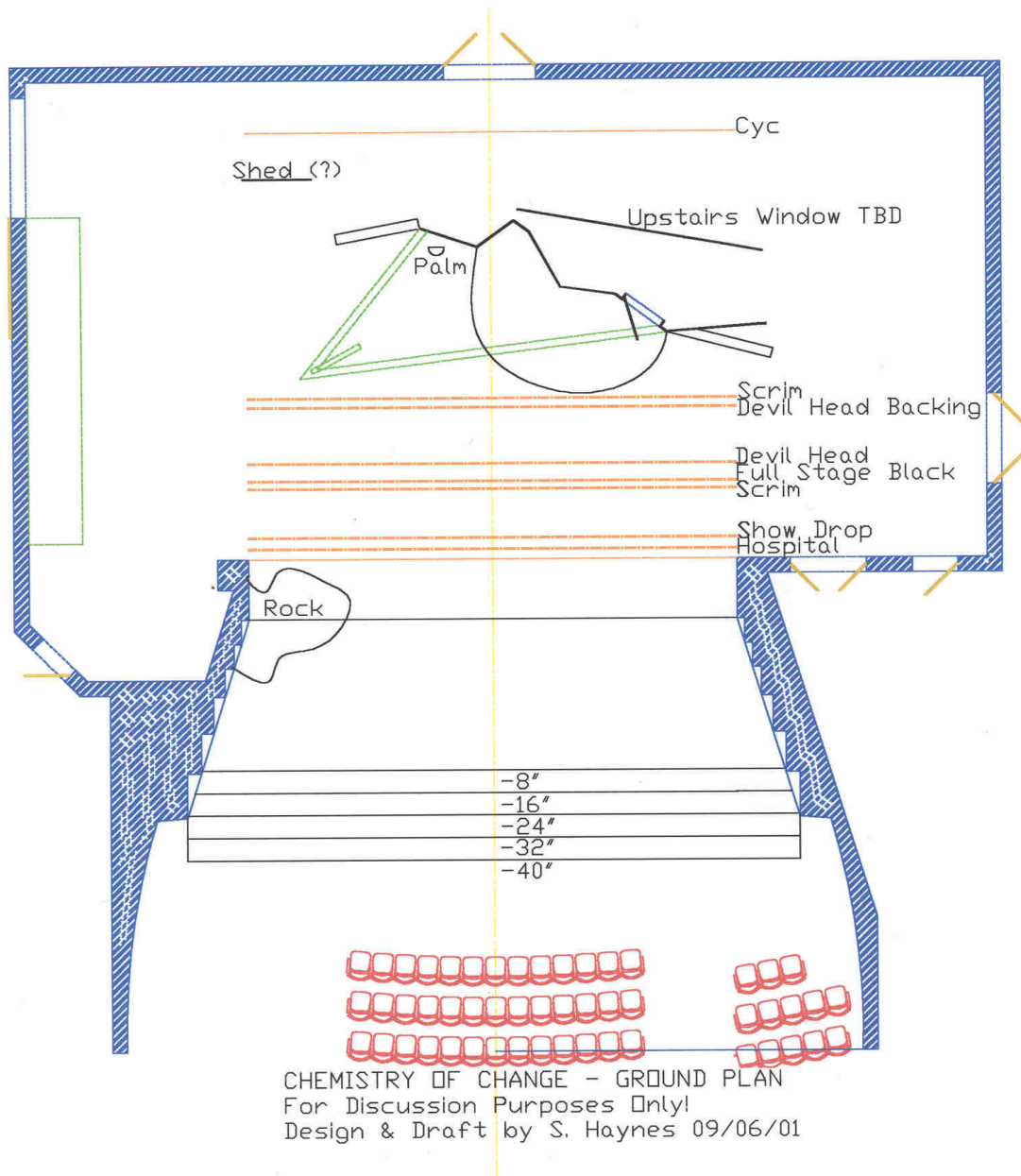


Fig. 6.21

PRELIMINARY GROUND PLAN

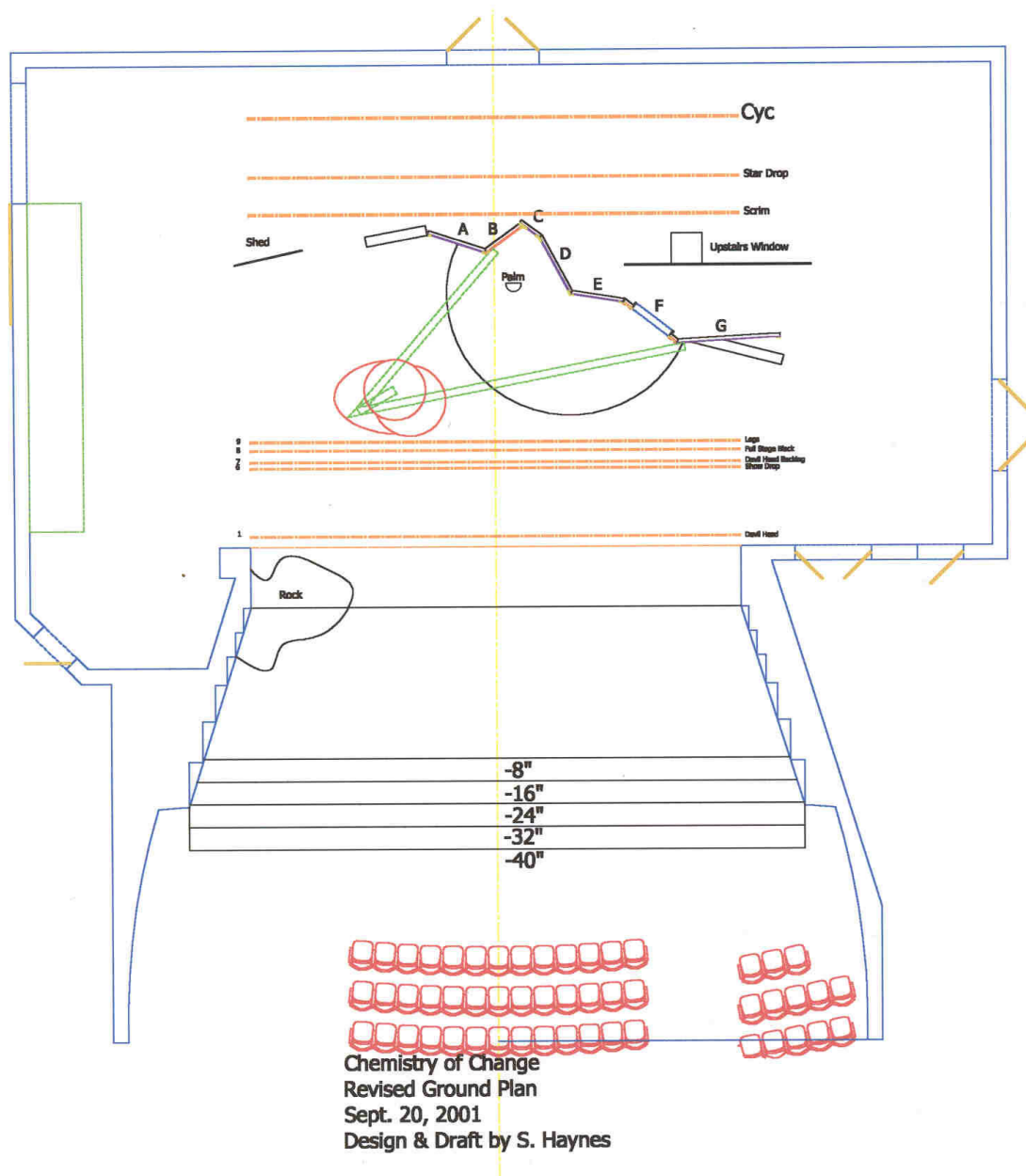


Fig. 6.22

FINAL GROUND PLAN

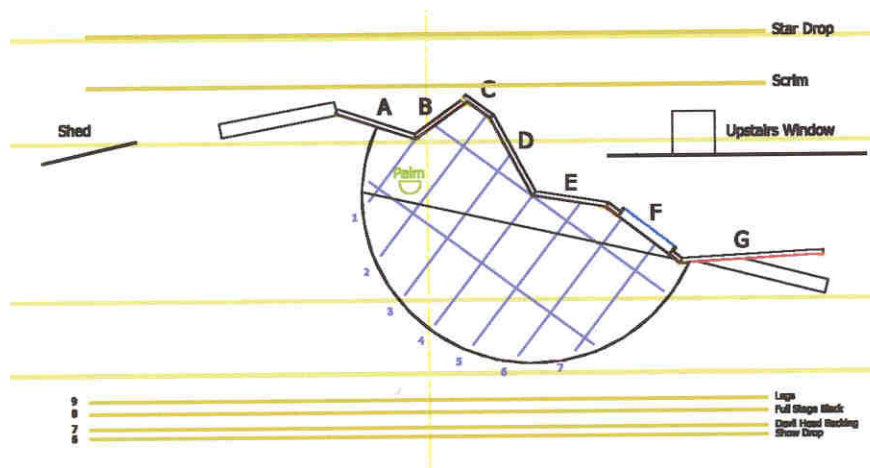


Fig. 6.23

GROUND PLAN WITH RAKE LAYOUT

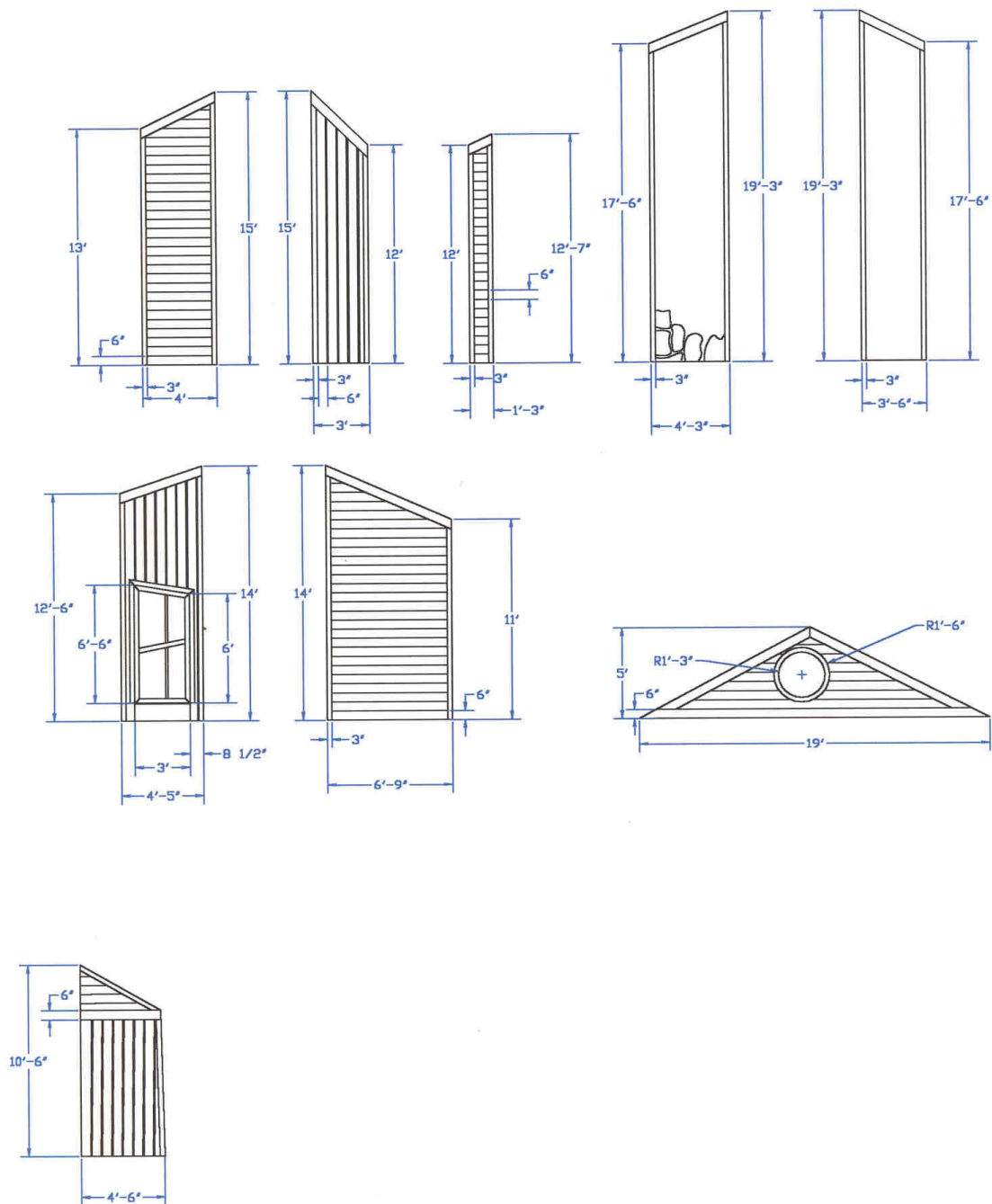


Fig. 6.24

WALL ELEVATIONS

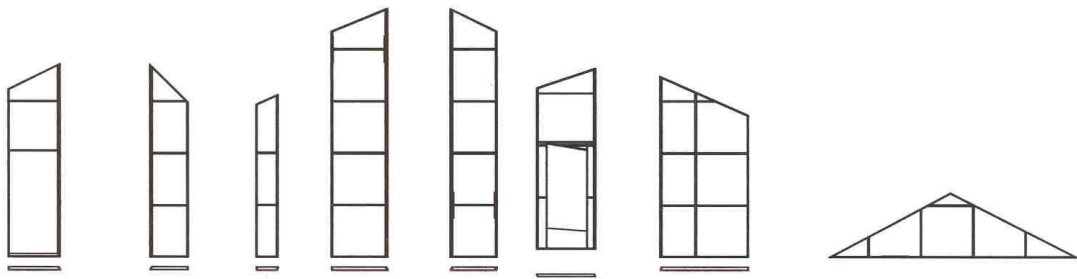


Fig. 6.25

ELEVATION SHOWING FRAMING

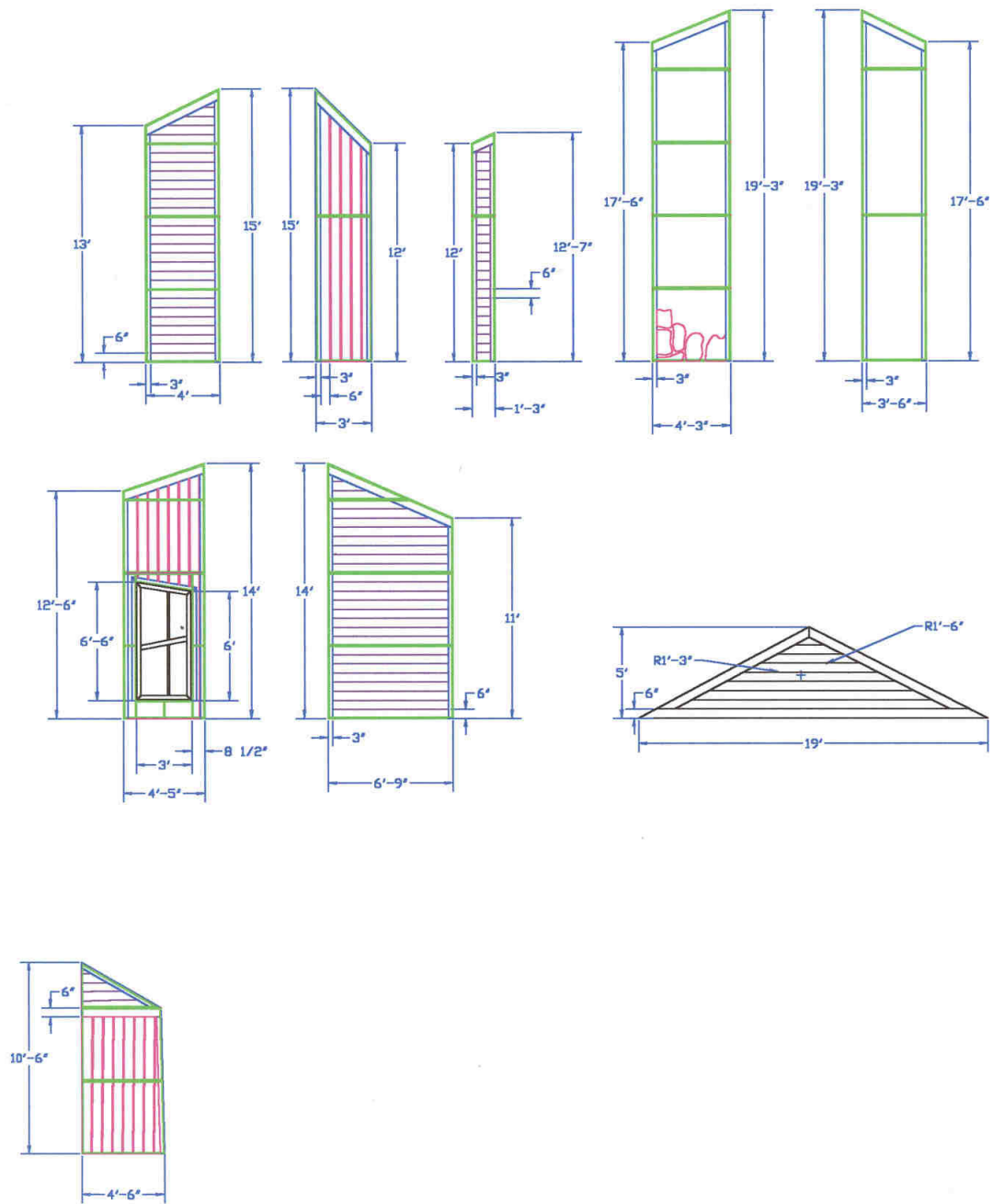
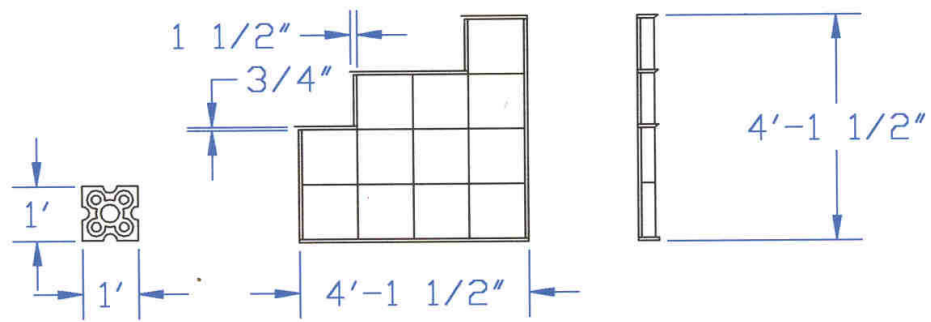
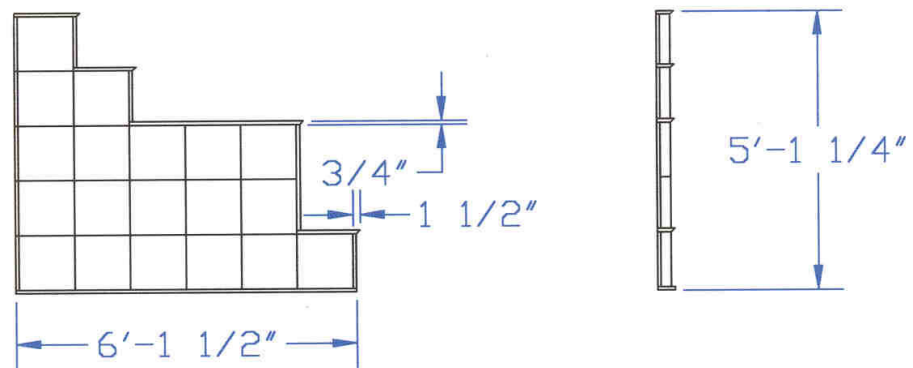


Fig. 6.26

COMPOSITE ELEVATION



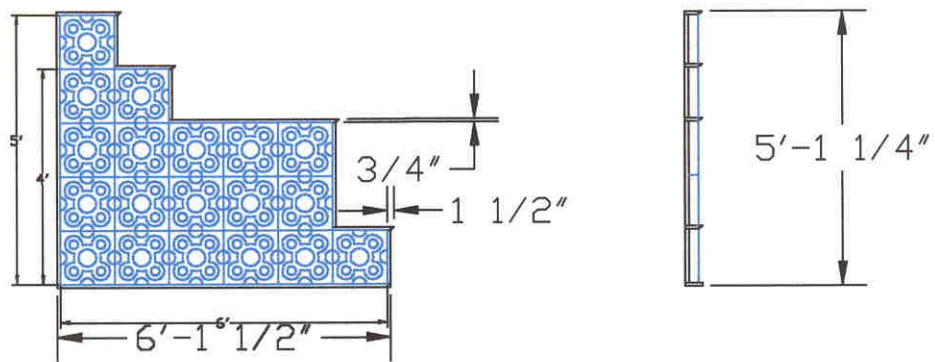
SR Decorative Concrete Wall



SL Decorative Concrete Wall

Fig. 6.27

CONCRETE WALL ELEVATION



SL Decorative Concrete Wall

Fig. 6.28

STAGE LEFT CONCRETE WALL DETAIL

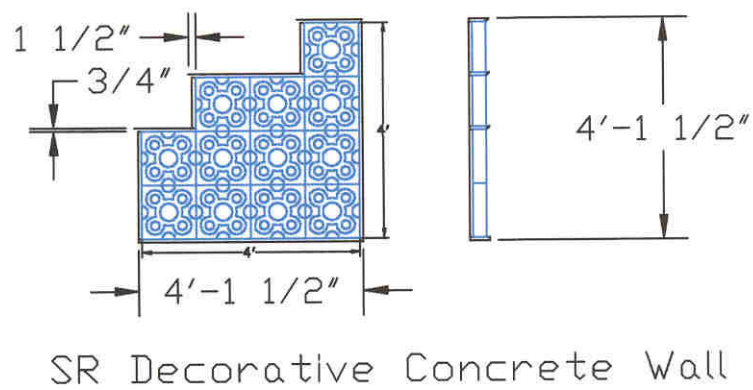


Fig. 6.29

STAGE RIGHT CONCRETE WALL DETAIL

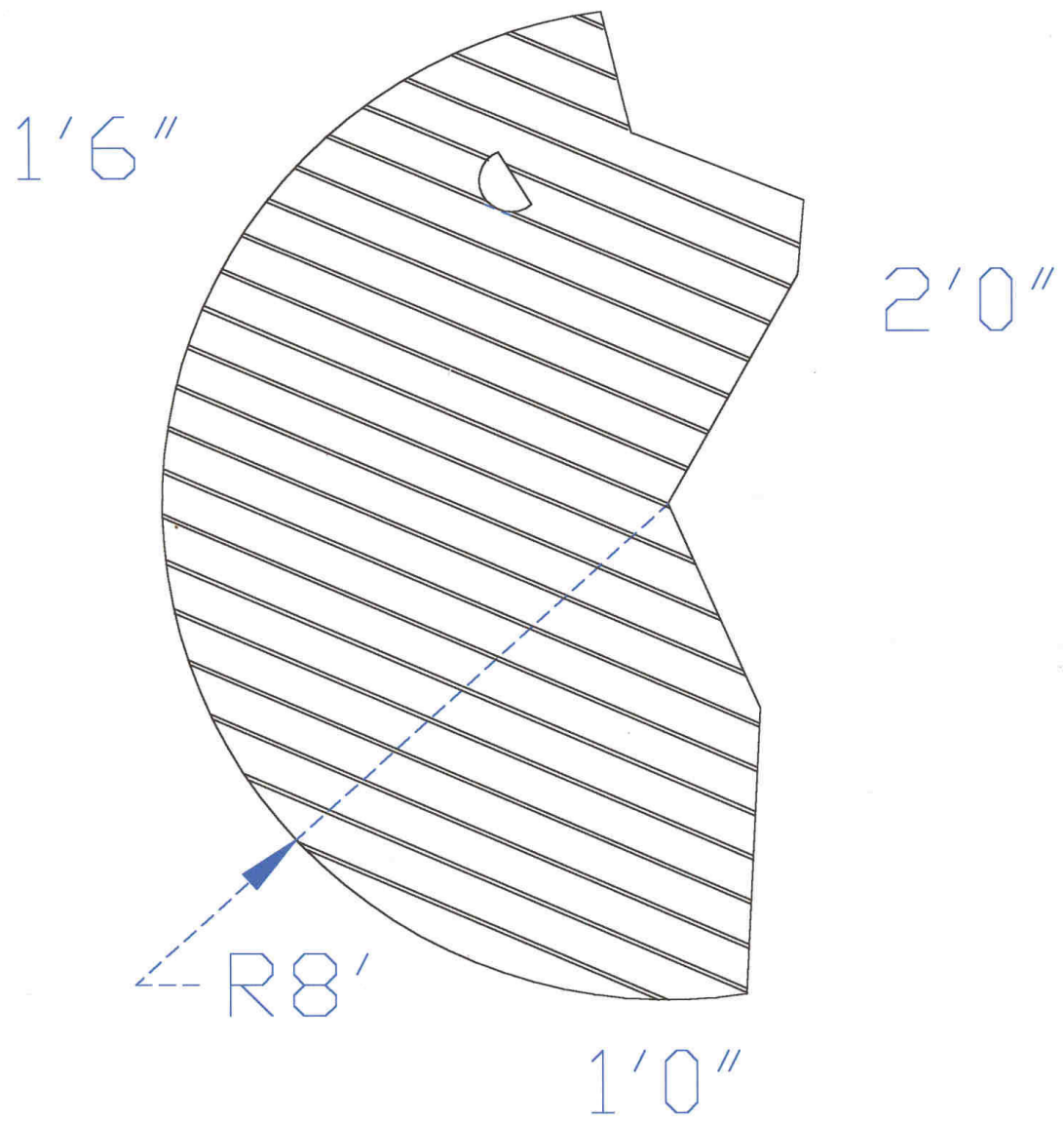
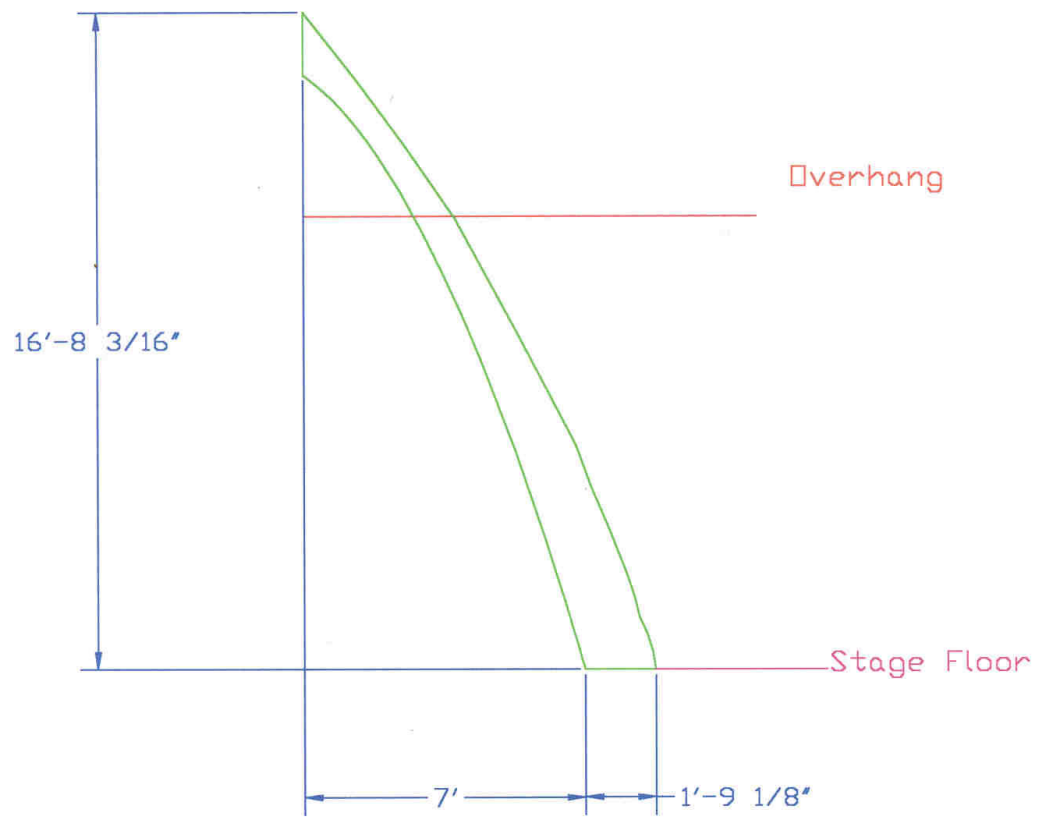


Fig. 6.30

RAKE PLAN VIEW



Please let Designer approve layout before cutting.

Fig. 6.31

PALM TREE ELEVATION

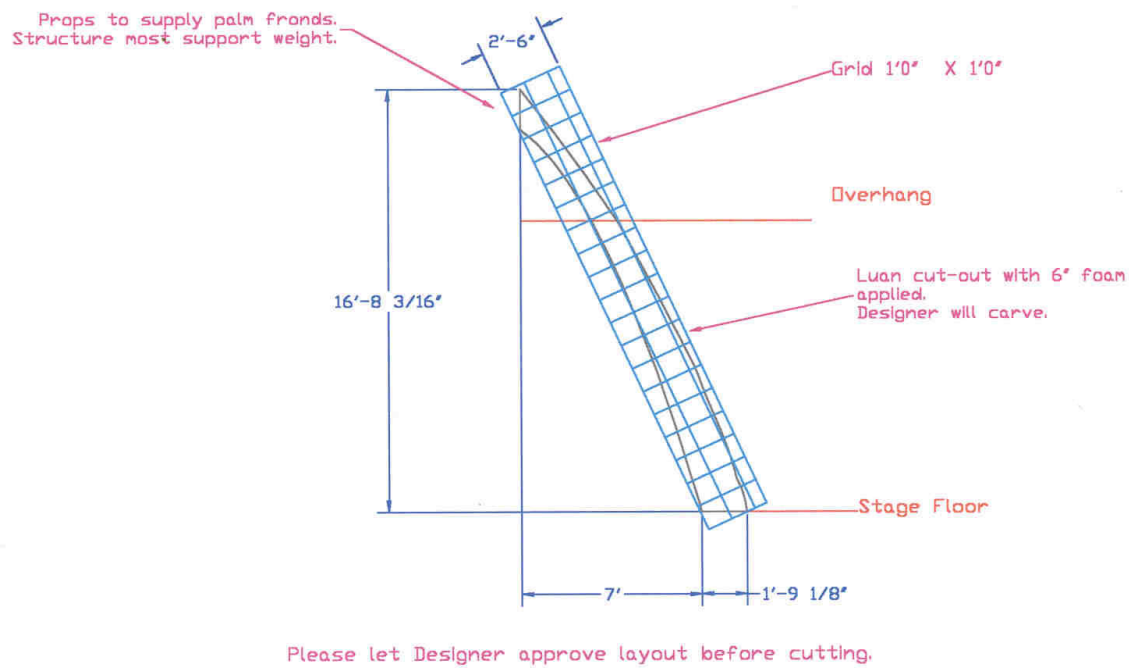


Fig. 6.32

PALM TREE ELEVATION WITH GRID LAYOUT

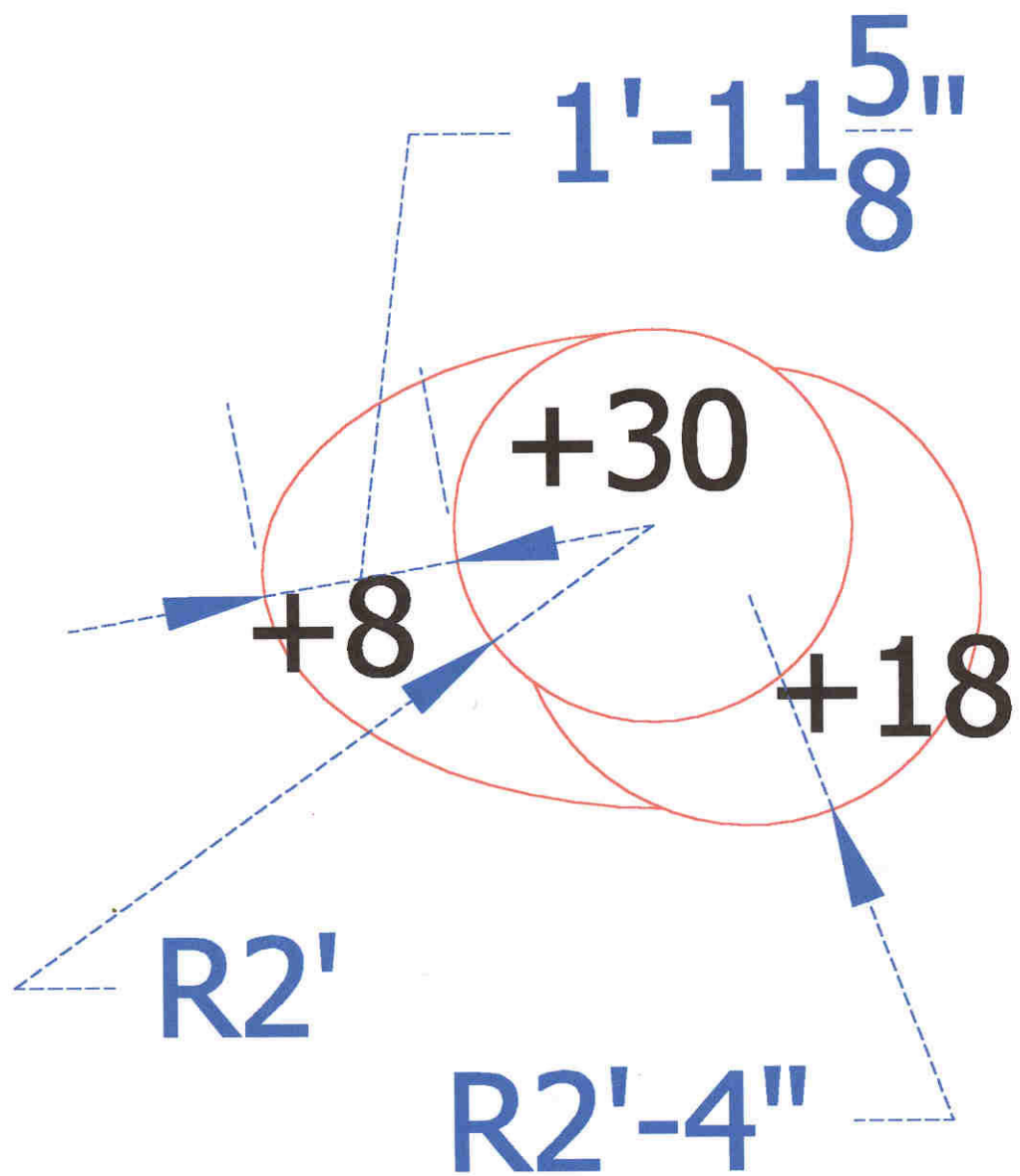


Fig. 6.33

POD PLAN VIEW

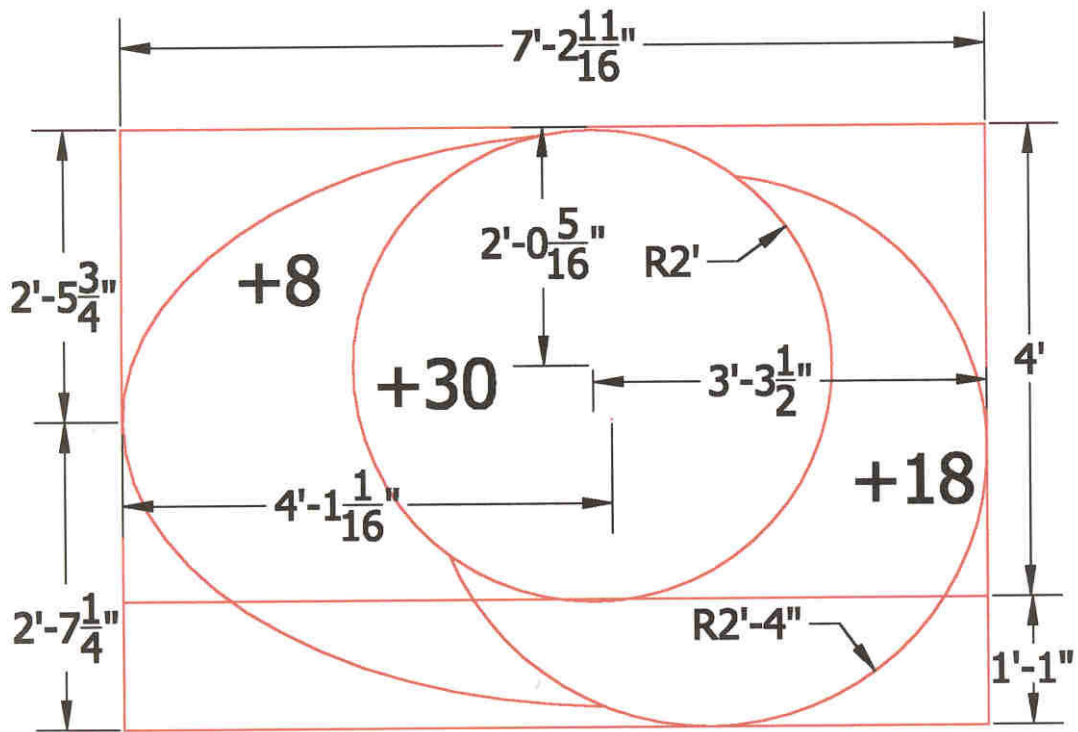


Fig. 6.34

POD DETAIL

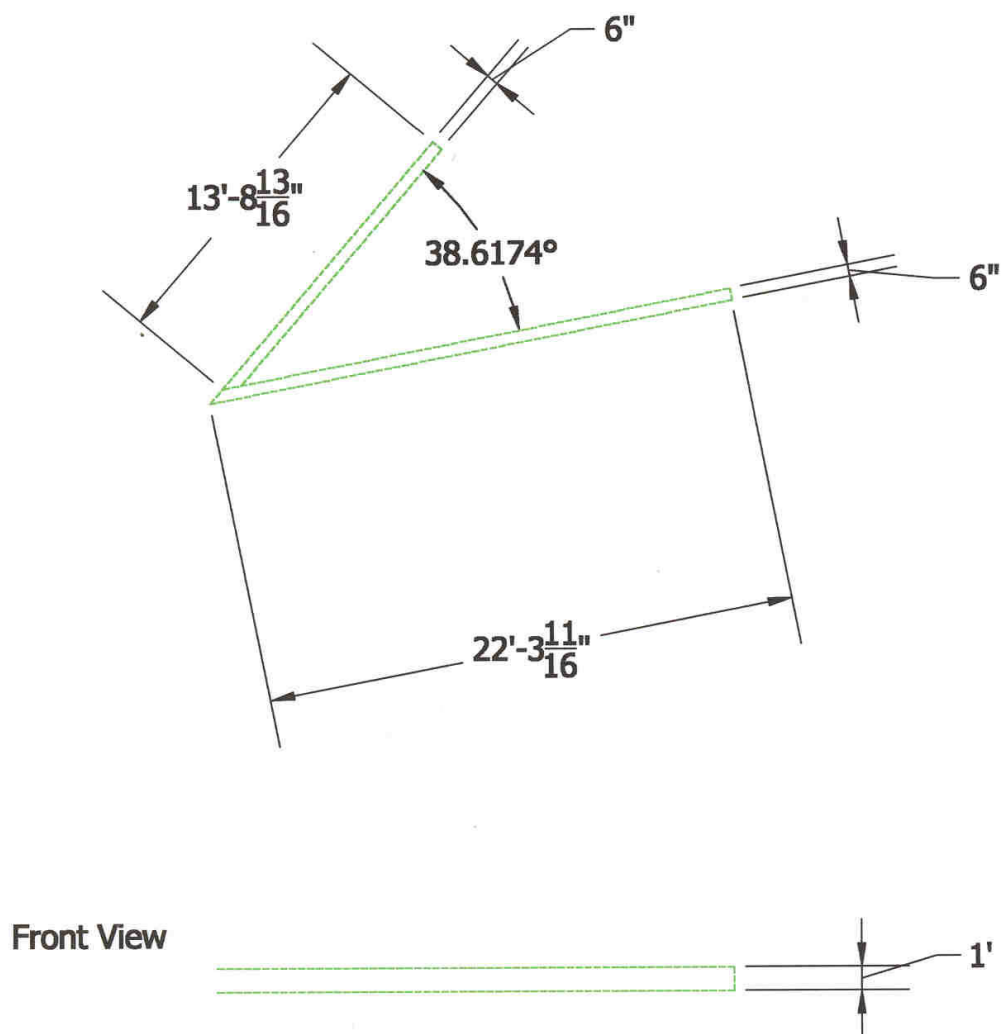


Fig. 6.35

OVERHANG PLAN VIEW

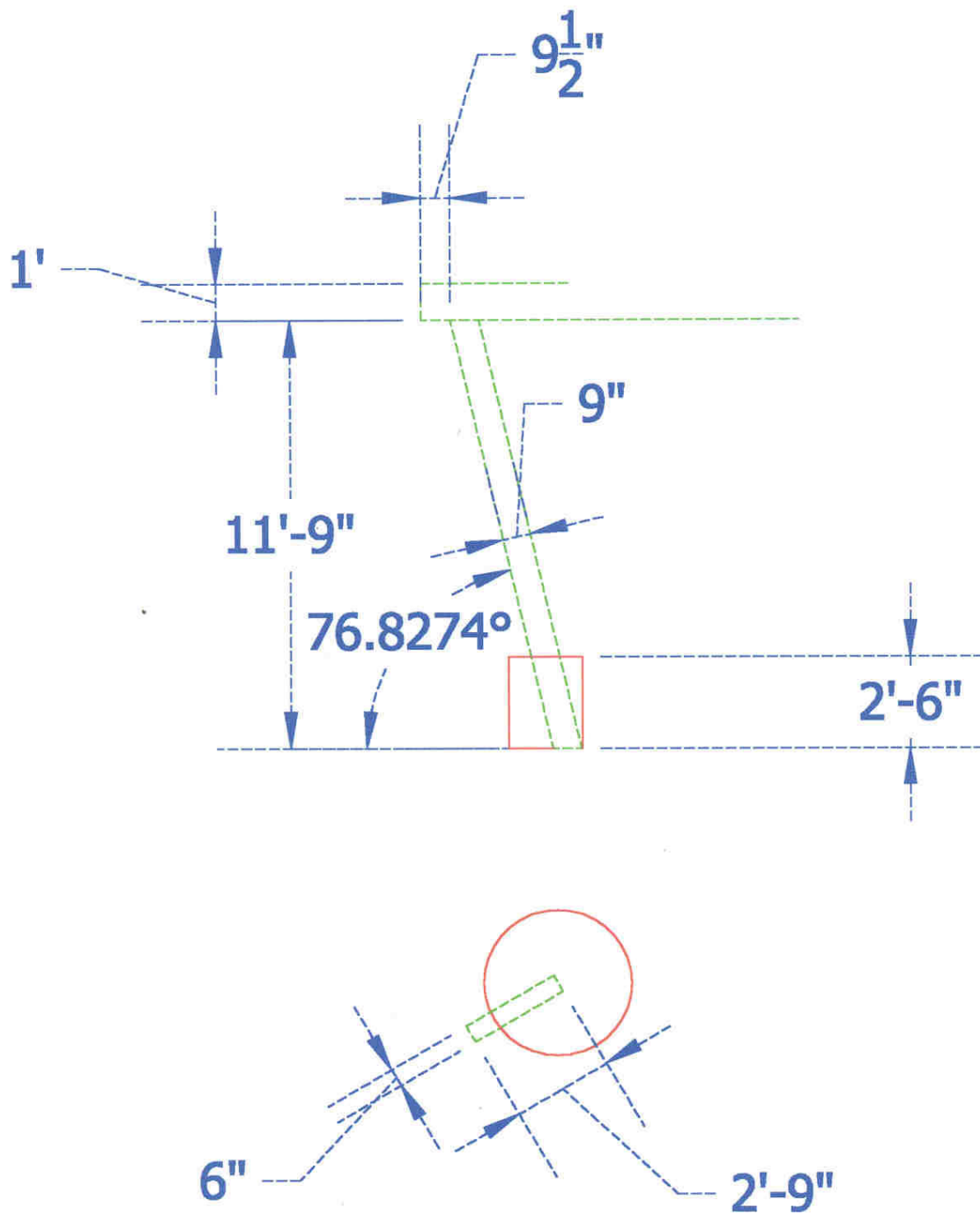


Fig. 6.36

OVERHANG ELEVATION DETAIL

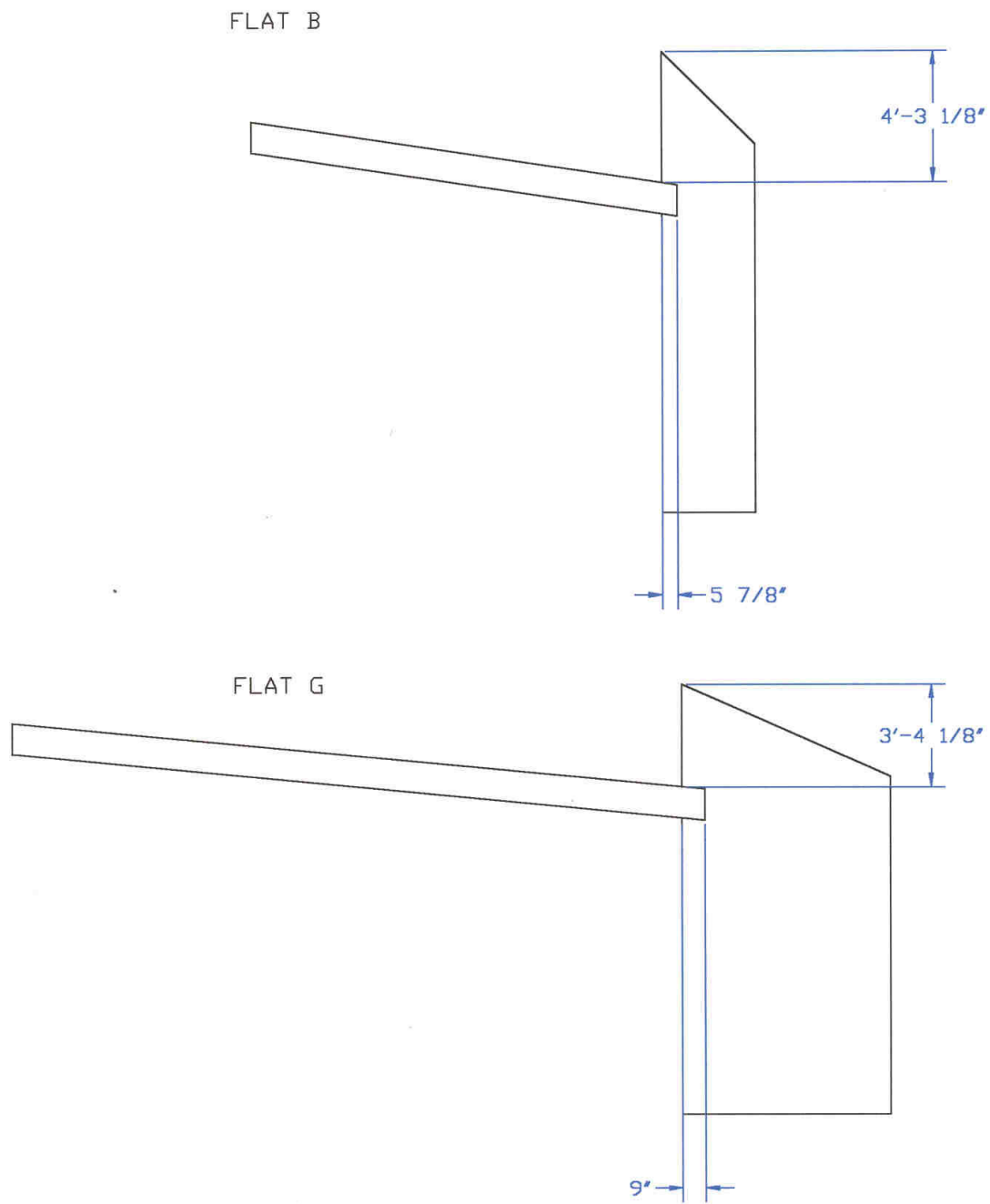


Fig. 6.37

OVERHANG ELEVATION

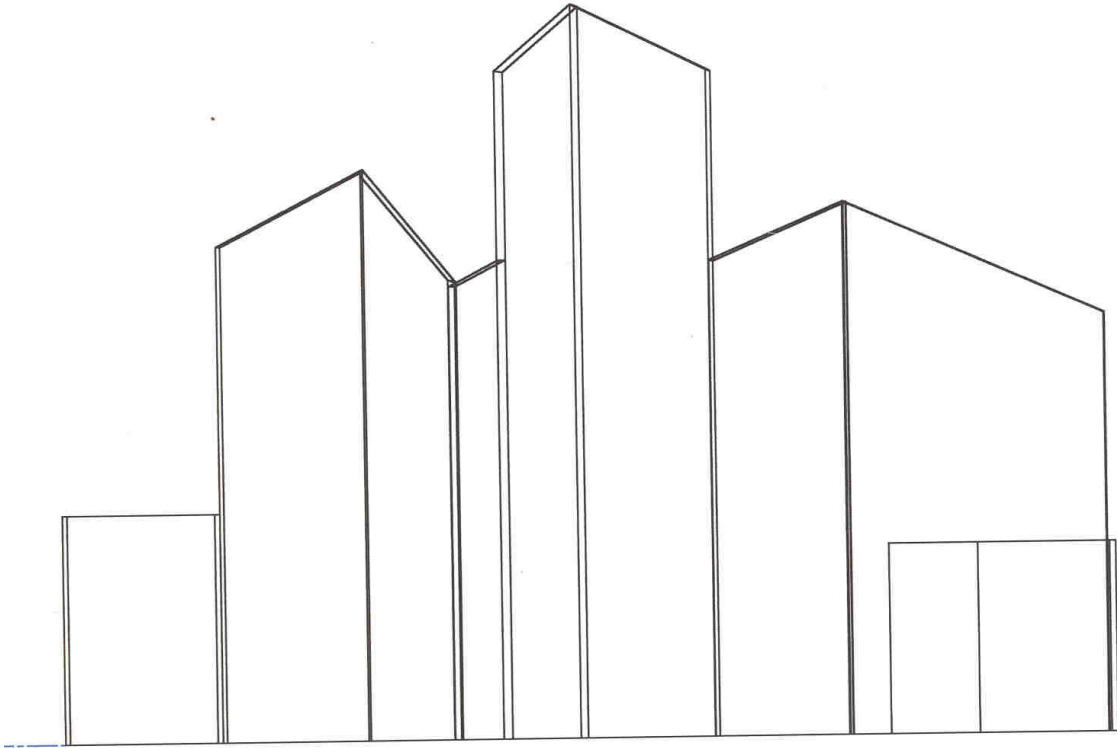


Fig. 6.38

FIRST ATTEMPT AT THREE-DIMENSIONAL CAD DRAWING

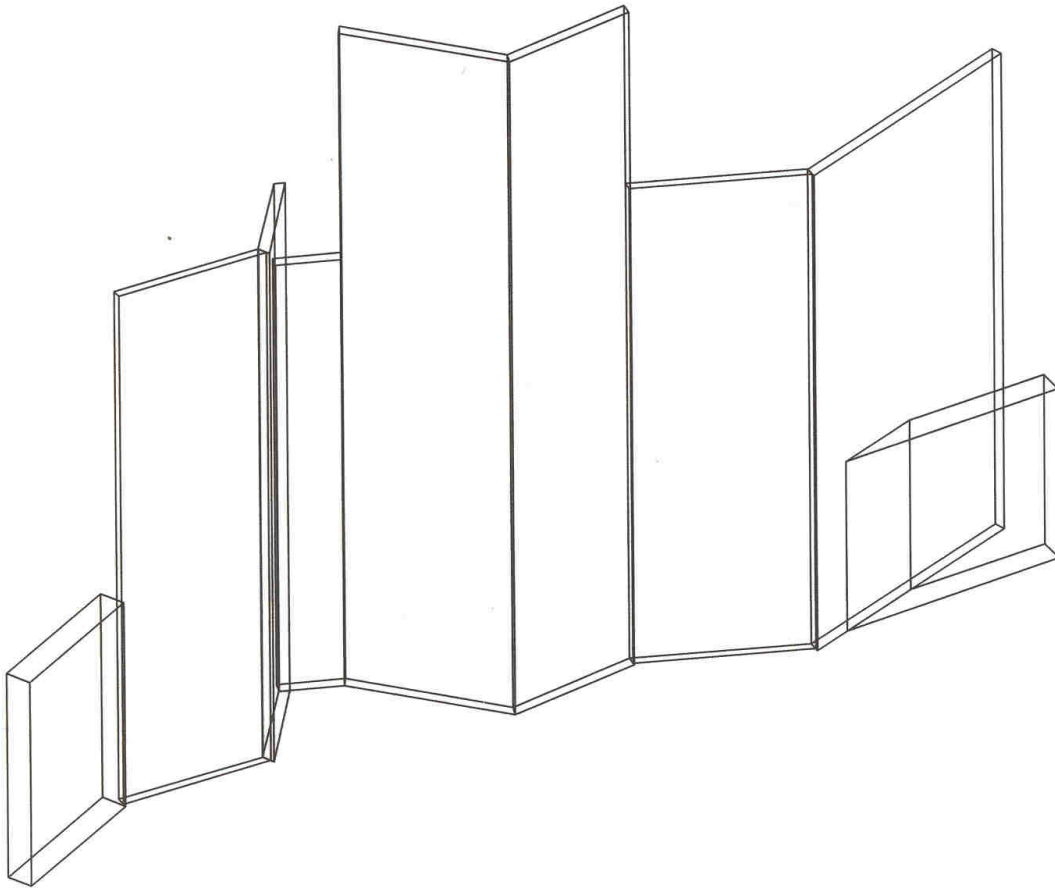


Fig. 6.39

SECOND THREE-DIMENSIONAL CAD MODEL

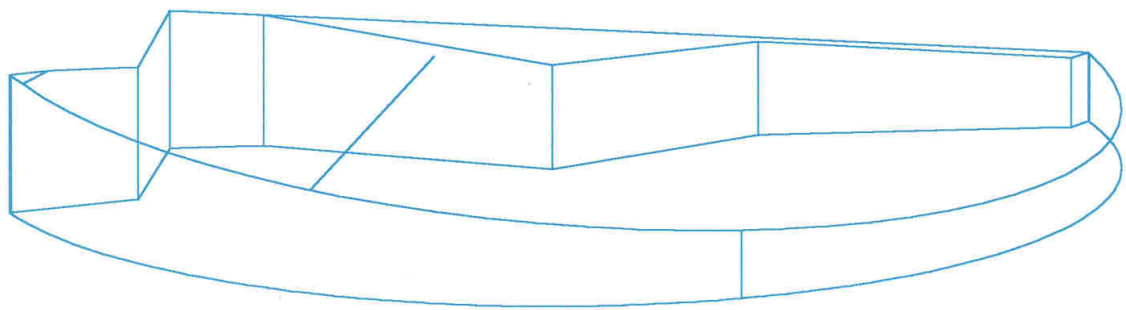


Fig. 6.40

THREE-DIMENSIONAL RAKE MODEL

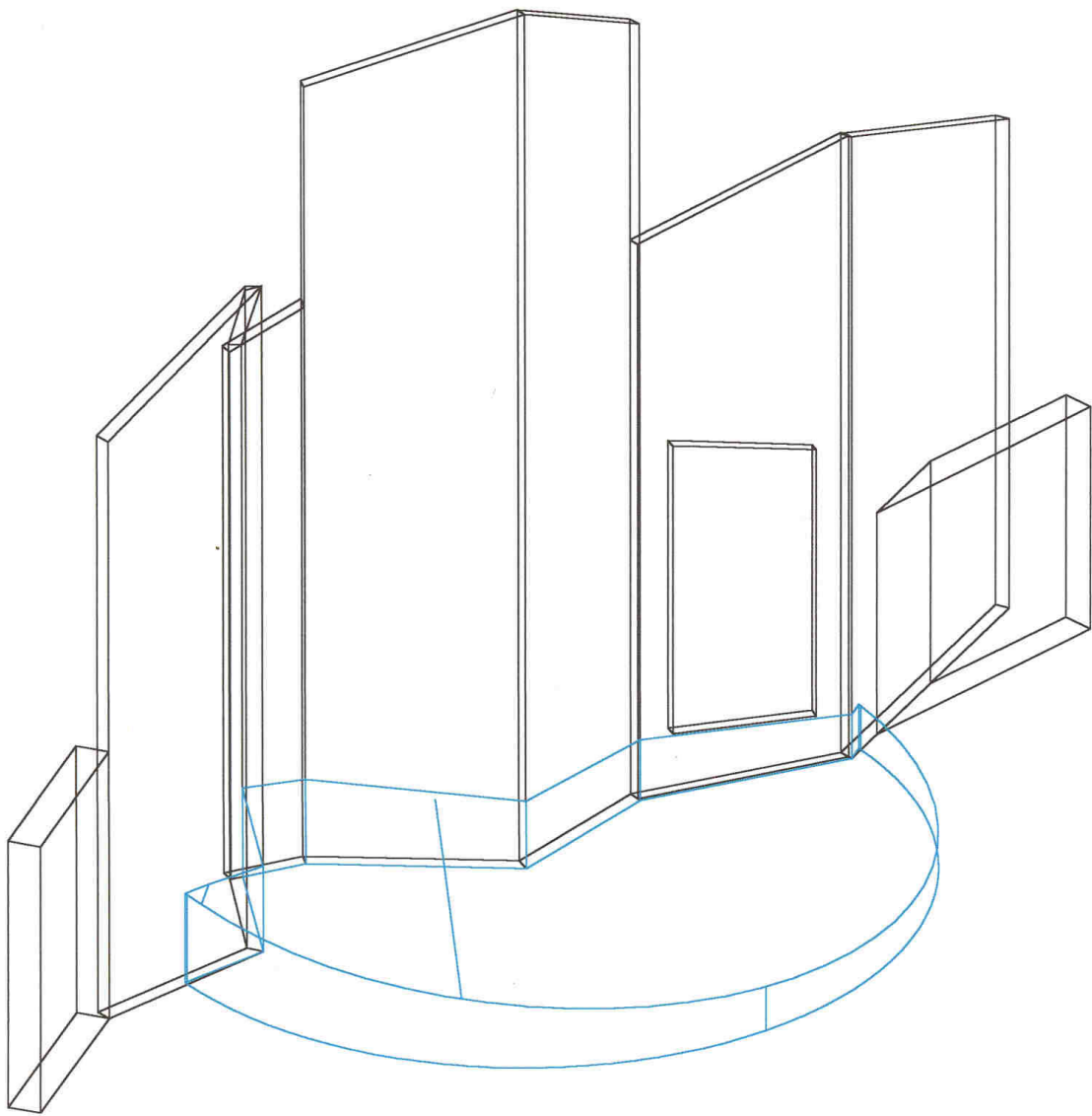


Fig. 6.41

MODEL WITH RAKE ADDED

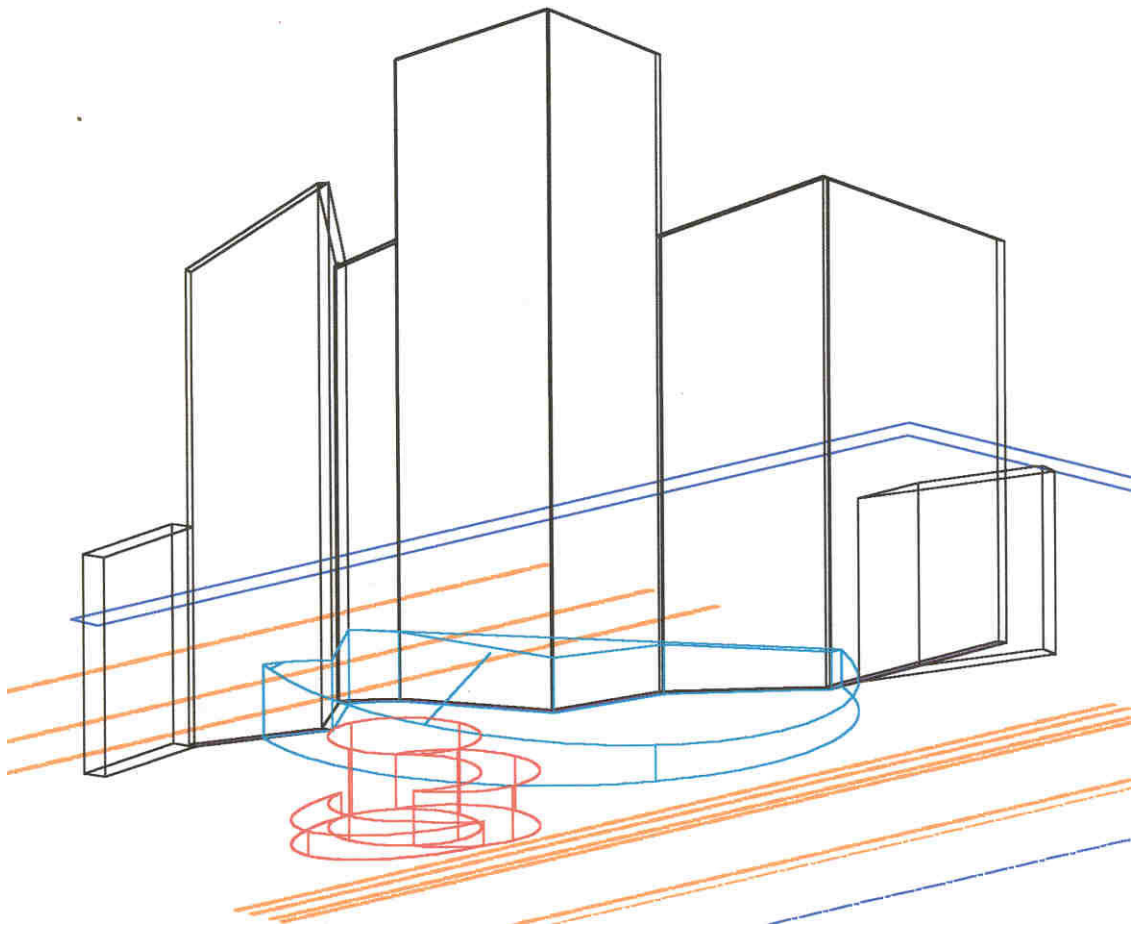


Fig. 6.42

COMPOSITE MODEL

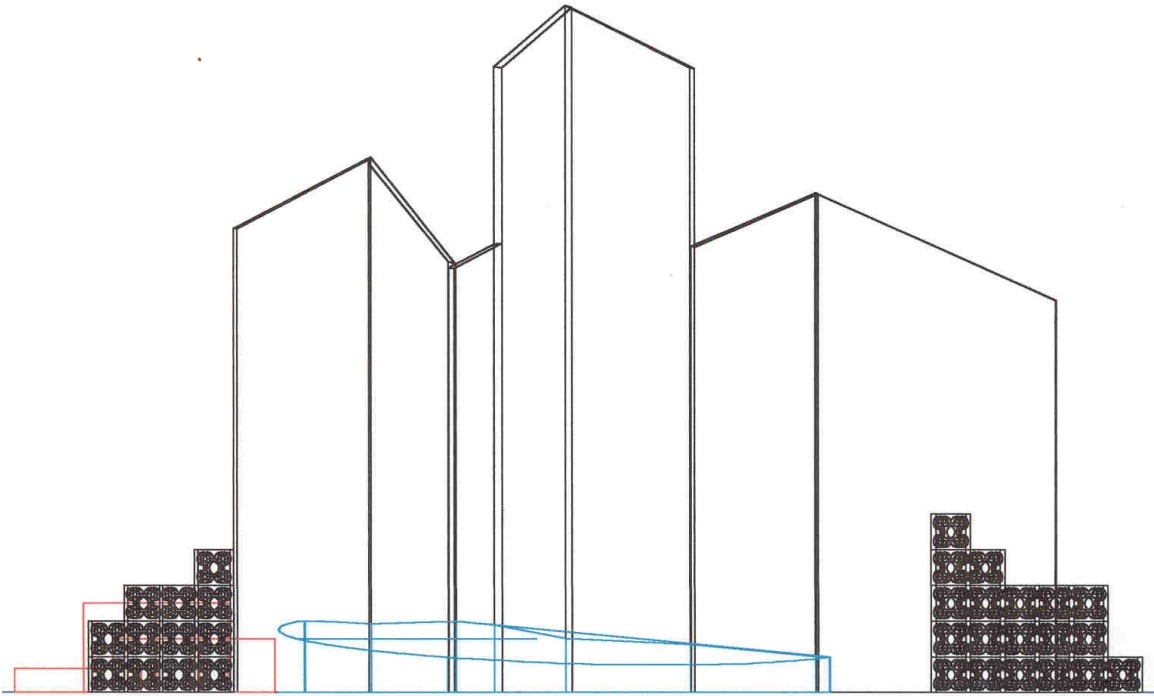


Fig. 6.43

MODEL WITH CONCRETE WALL DETAIL



Fig. 6.44

HELL HOLE ELEVATION

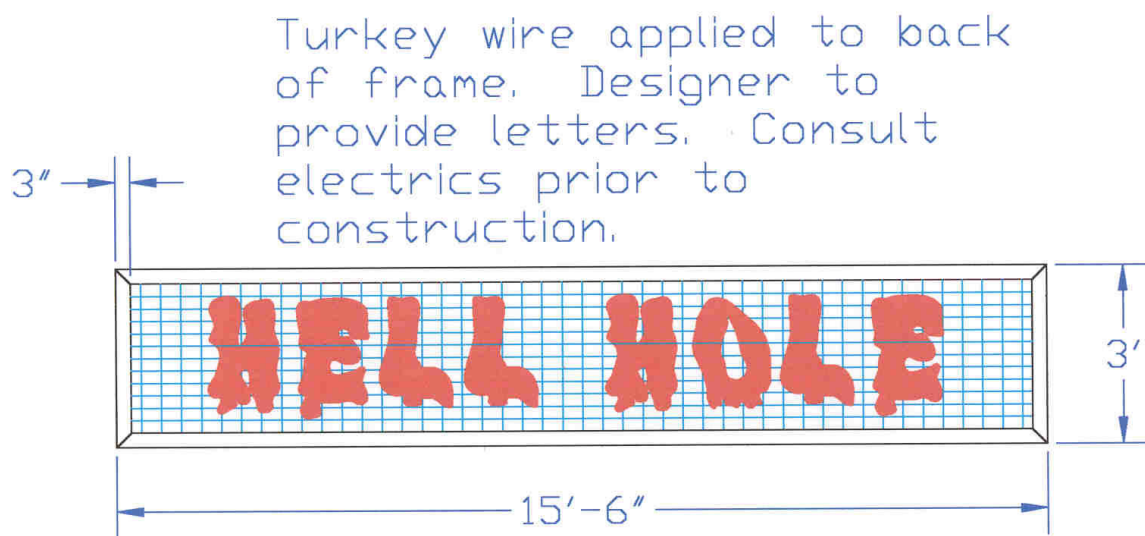


Fig. 6.45

HELL HOLE SIGN ELEVATION

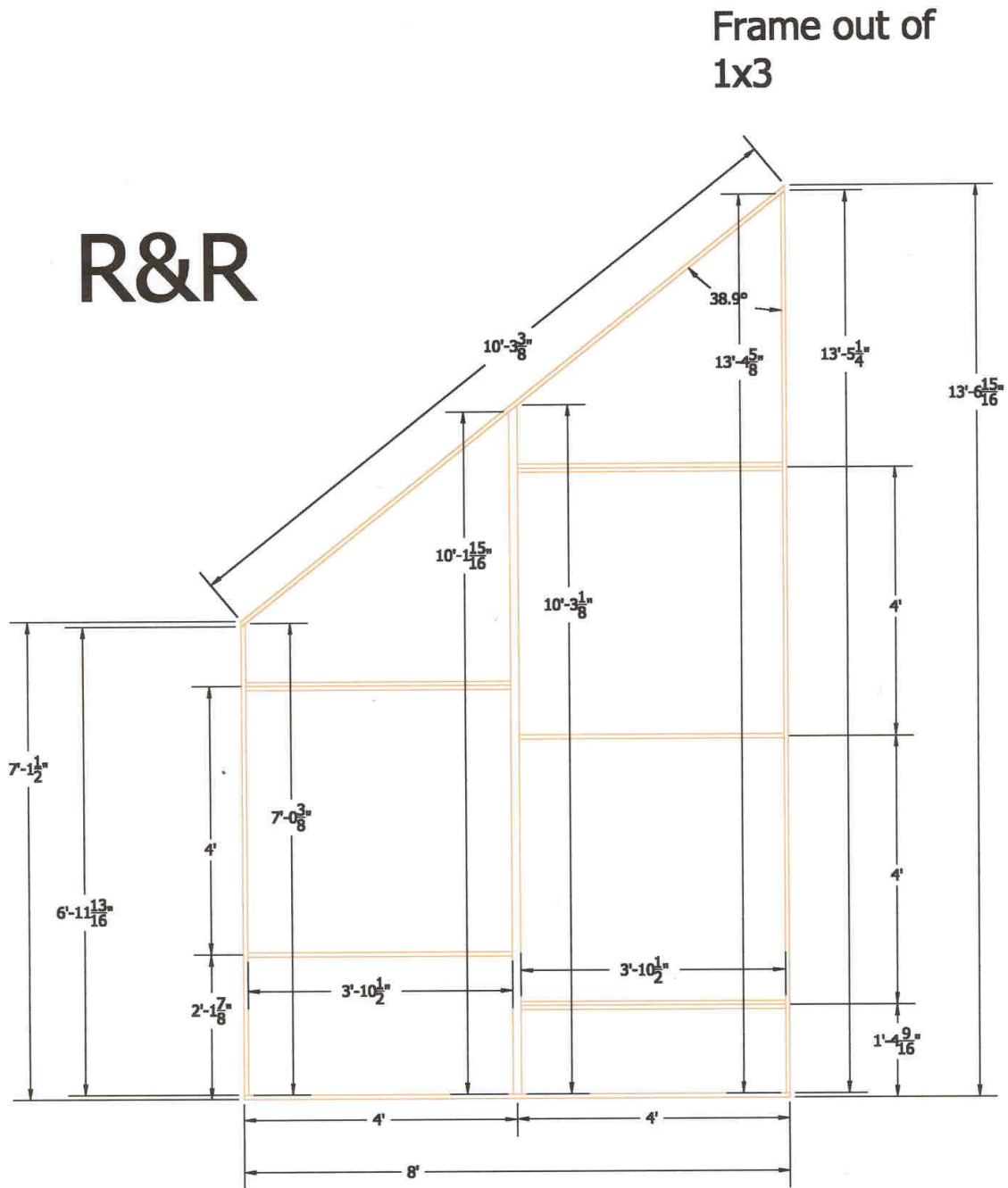


Fig. 6.46

FLAME WALL FRAMING

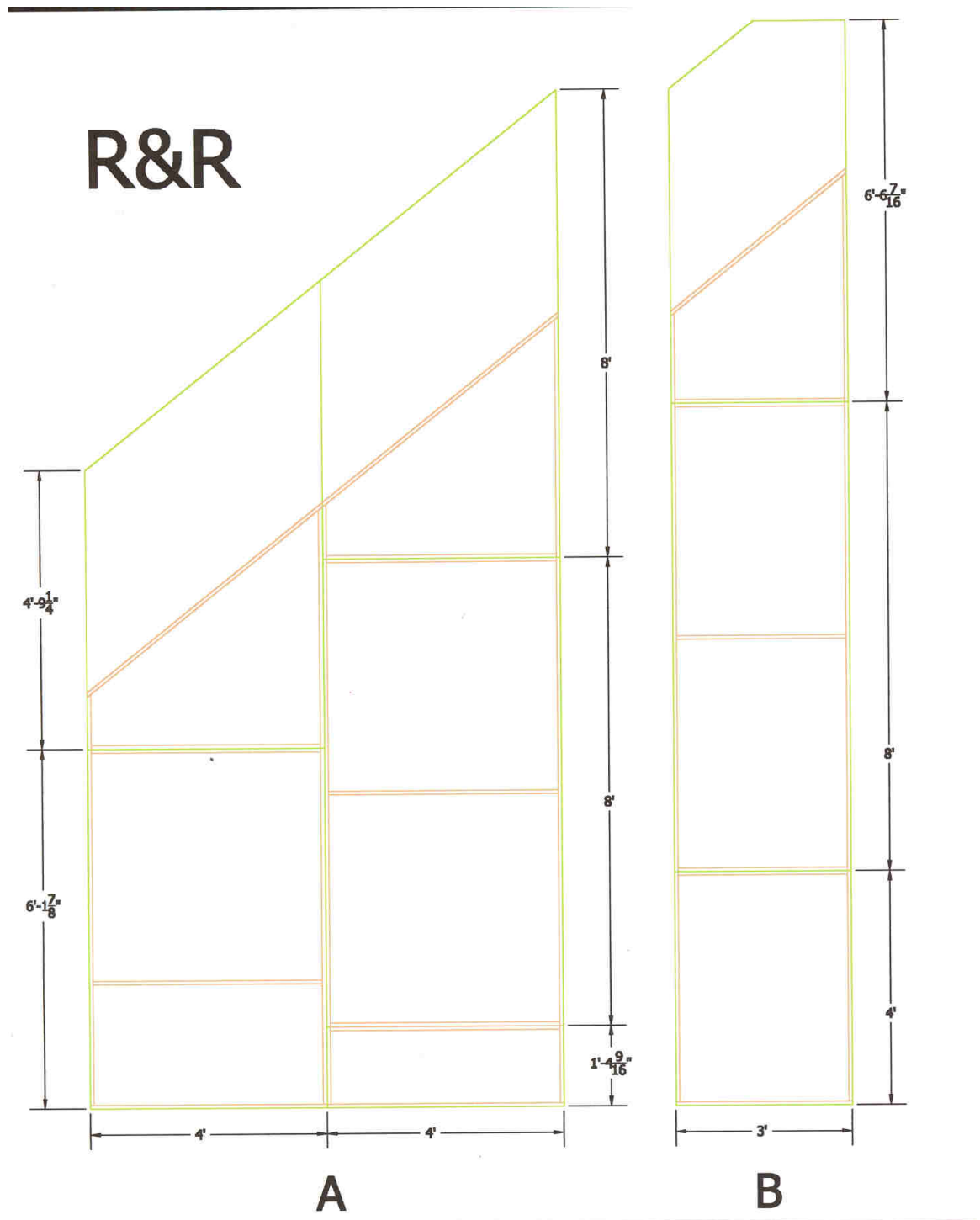
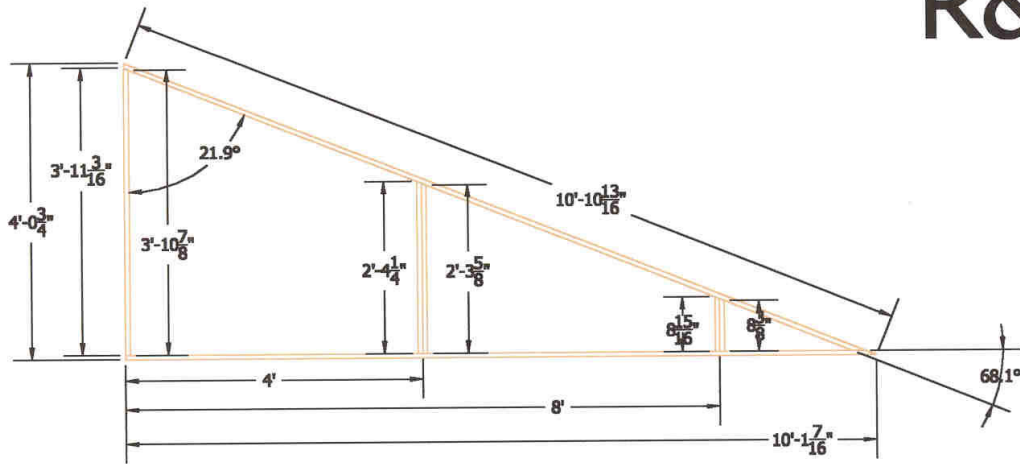


Fig. 6.47

FLAME WALL DRAWING WITH LUAN PLACEMENT



Frame out of 1x3 and skin with 1/4" Luaun.

Luaun overhangs $4\frac{1}{4}"$ to act as facing of wagon

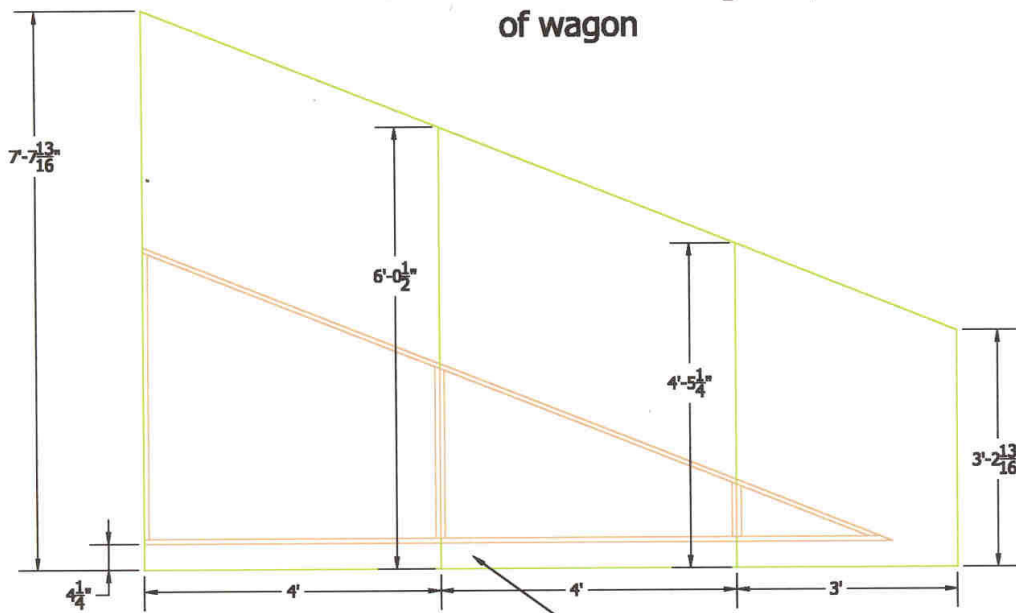


Fig. 6.48

SHORT FLAME WALL FRAMES

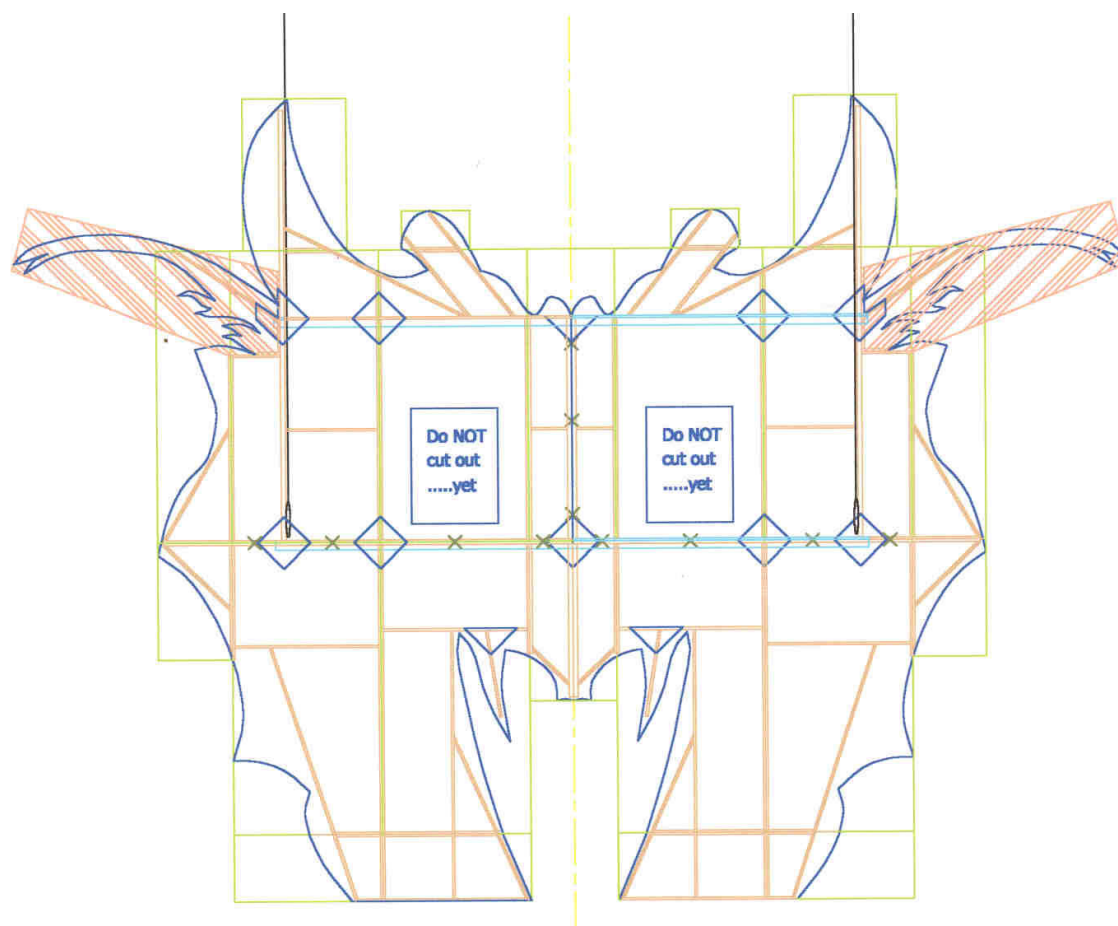


Fig. 6.49

TECHNICAL DIRECTOR'S HEAD LAYOUT

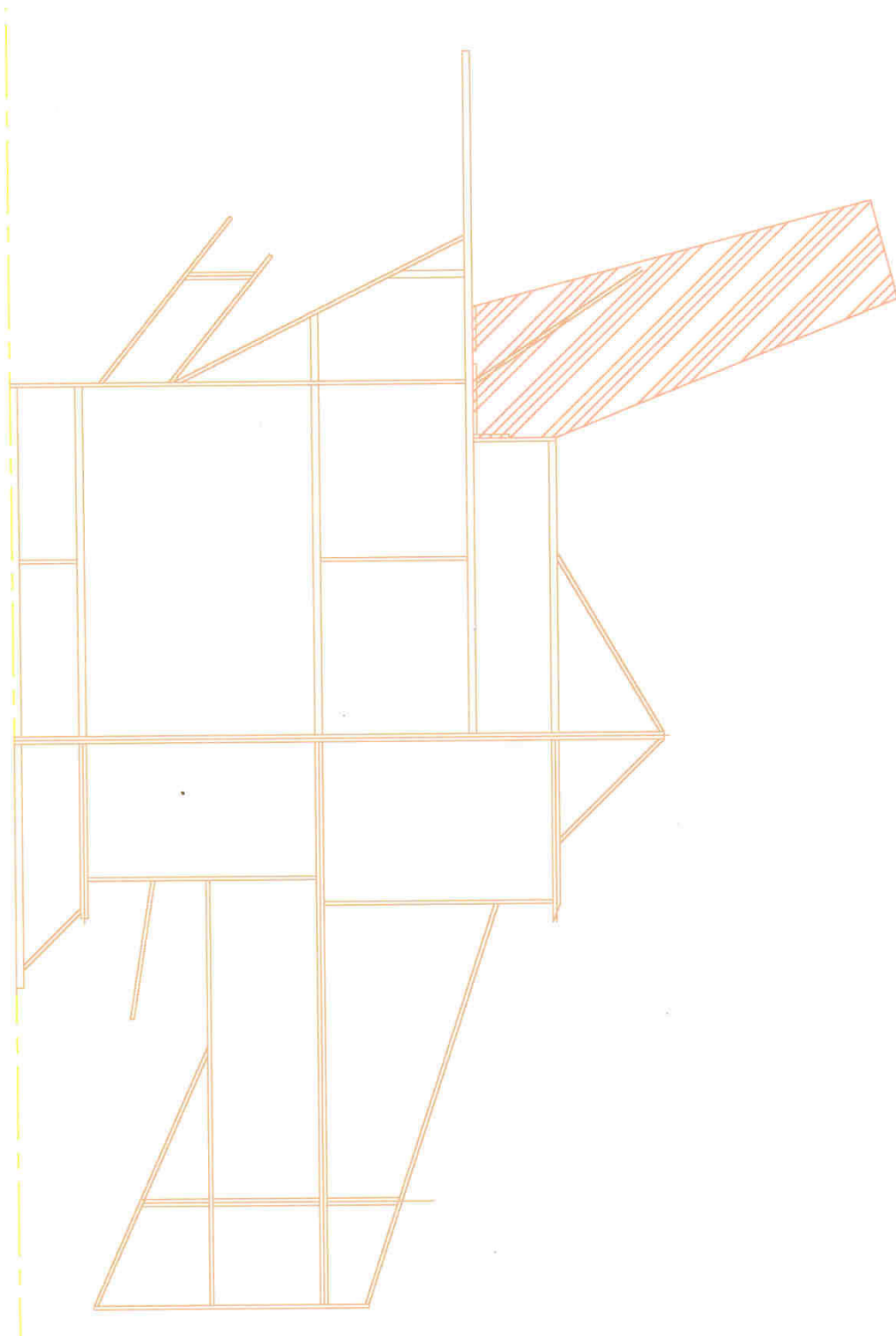


Fig. 6.50

DEVIL HEAD FRAME LAYOUT

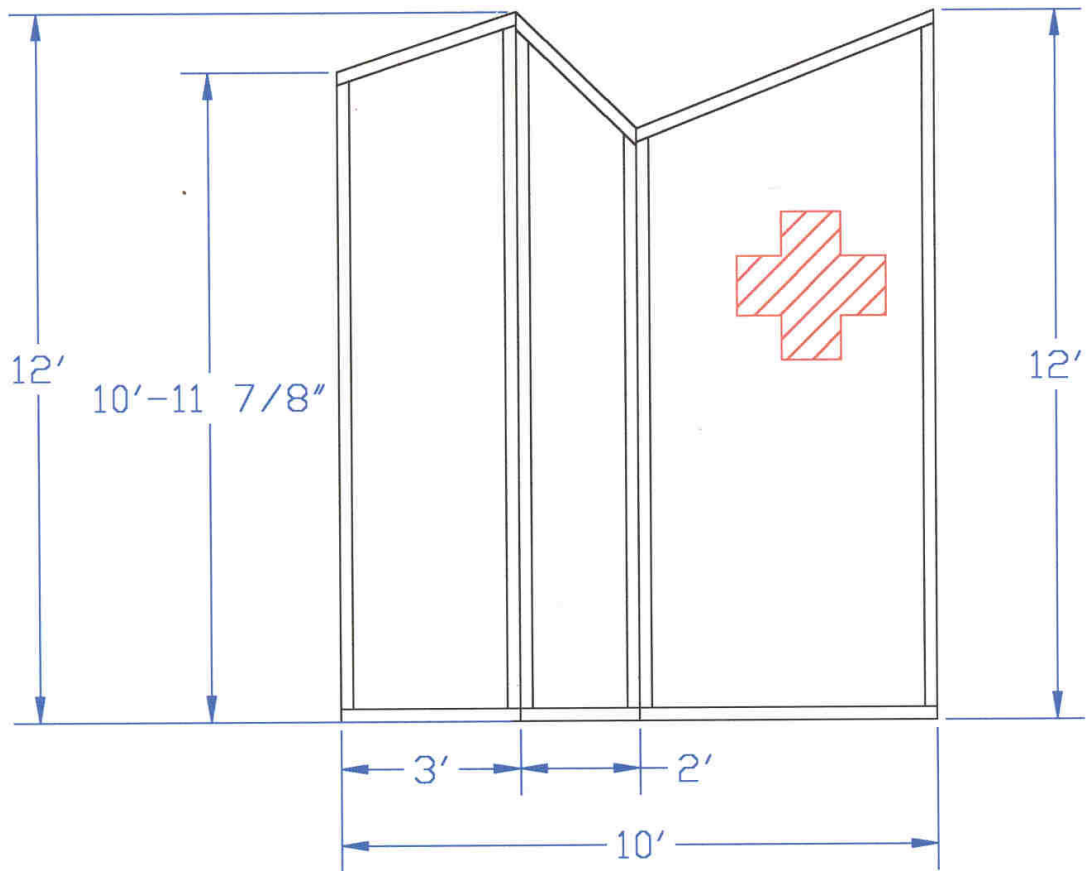


Fig. 6.51

ORIGINAL HOSPITAL ELEVATION

Frame mounted on 2' X 8' wagon. Stretched fabric with 'Red Cross' applied with paint.

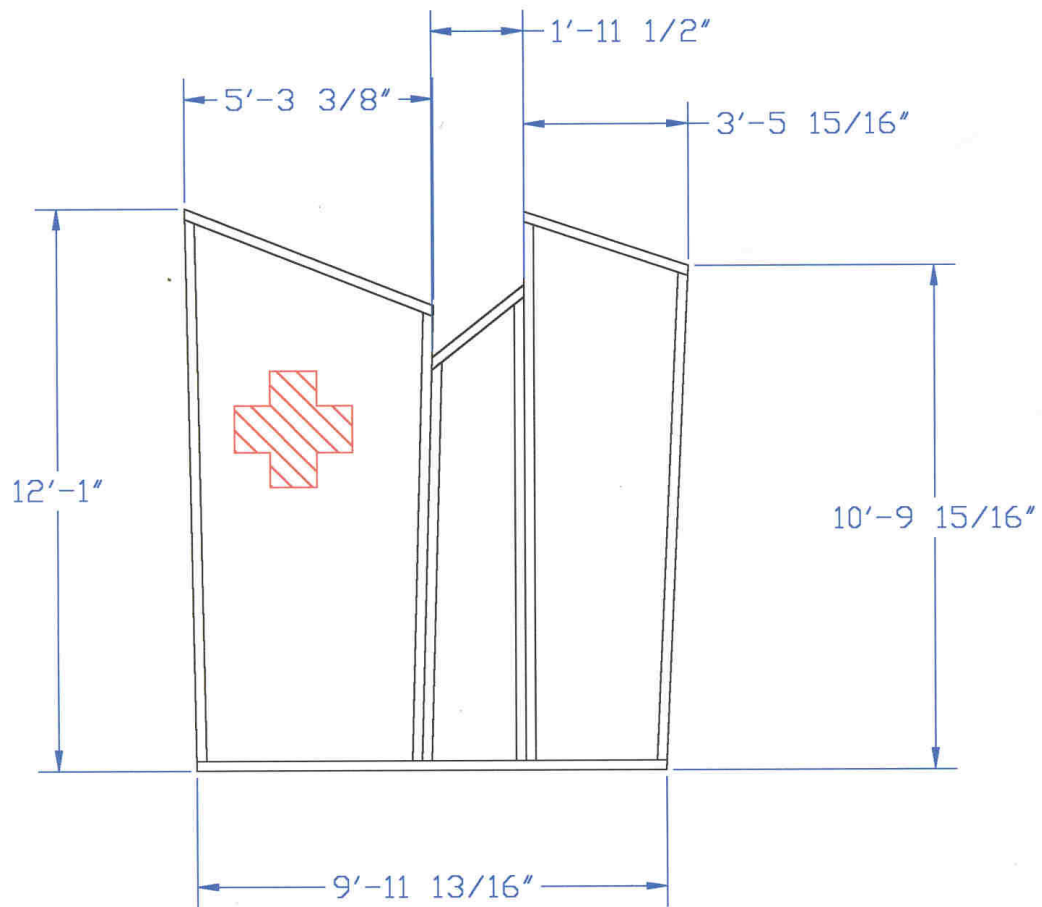


Fig. 6.52

FINAL HOSPITAL ELEVATION

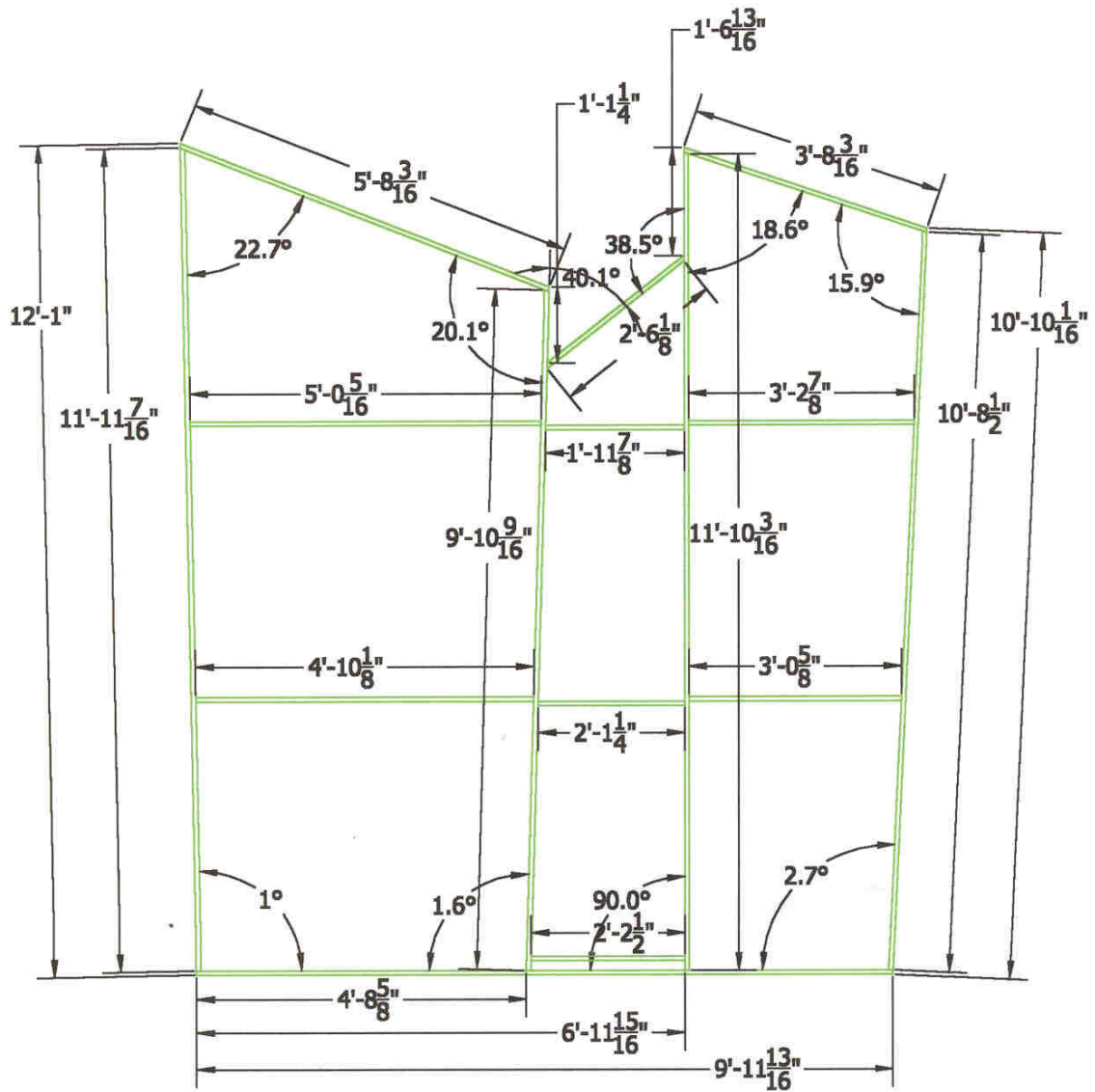


Fig. 6.53

HOSPITAL FRAMING LAYOUT

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS

The following photographs contain images I took at dress rehearsal. Supplementing these images are photographs taken by the publicity department at a formal photo call during the run of the show.

These images show how the production ultimately looked. The most esthetically pleasing moments in the show are represented here.

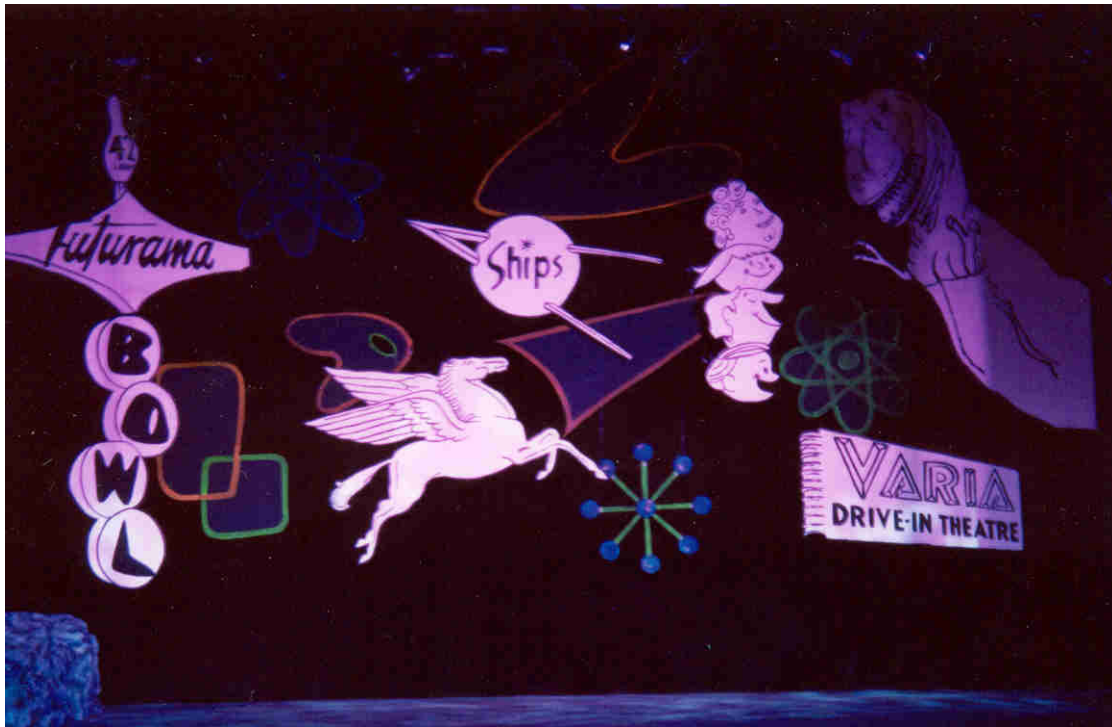


Fig. 6.54

FINAL SHOW DROP



Fig. 6.55

FINAL SET, COOL LIGHTING

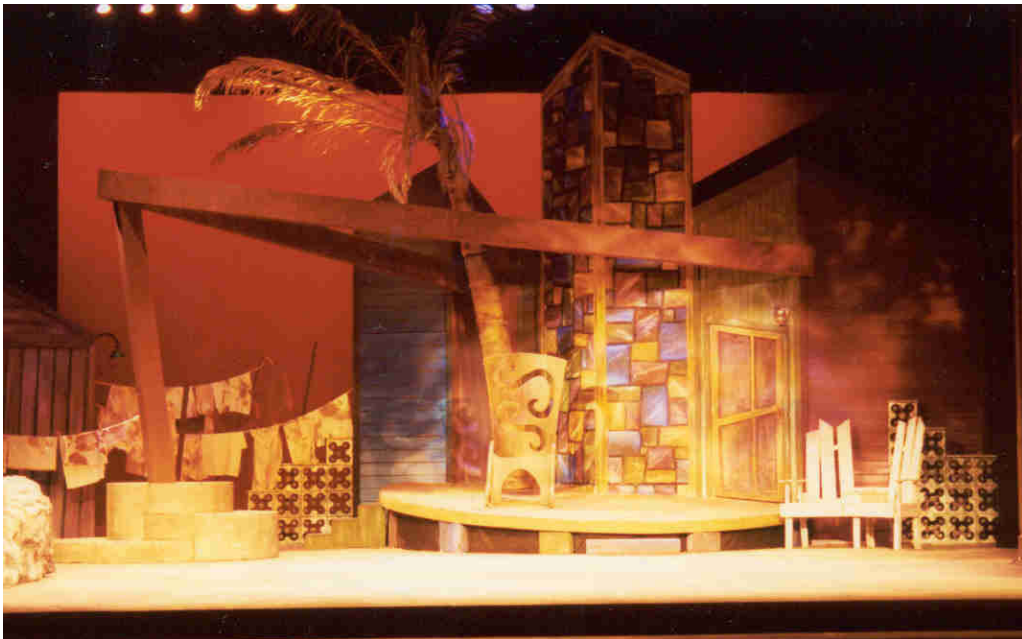


Fig. 6.56

FINAL SET, WARM LIGHTING



Fig. 6.57

PODS



Fig. 6.58

POD PAINT DETAIL



Fig. 6.59

CONCRETE BLOCKS

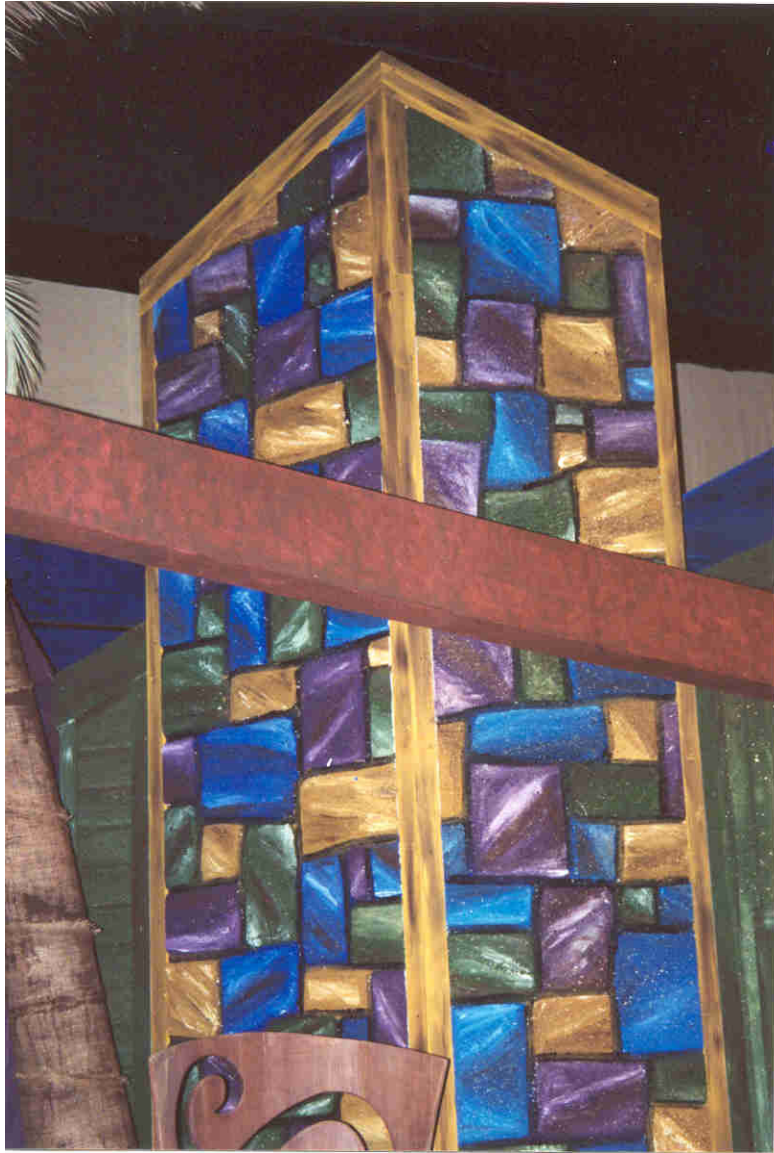


Fig. 6.60

CARVED FLAGSTONE DETAIL



Fig. 6.61

FLAGSTONE PAINT DETAIL

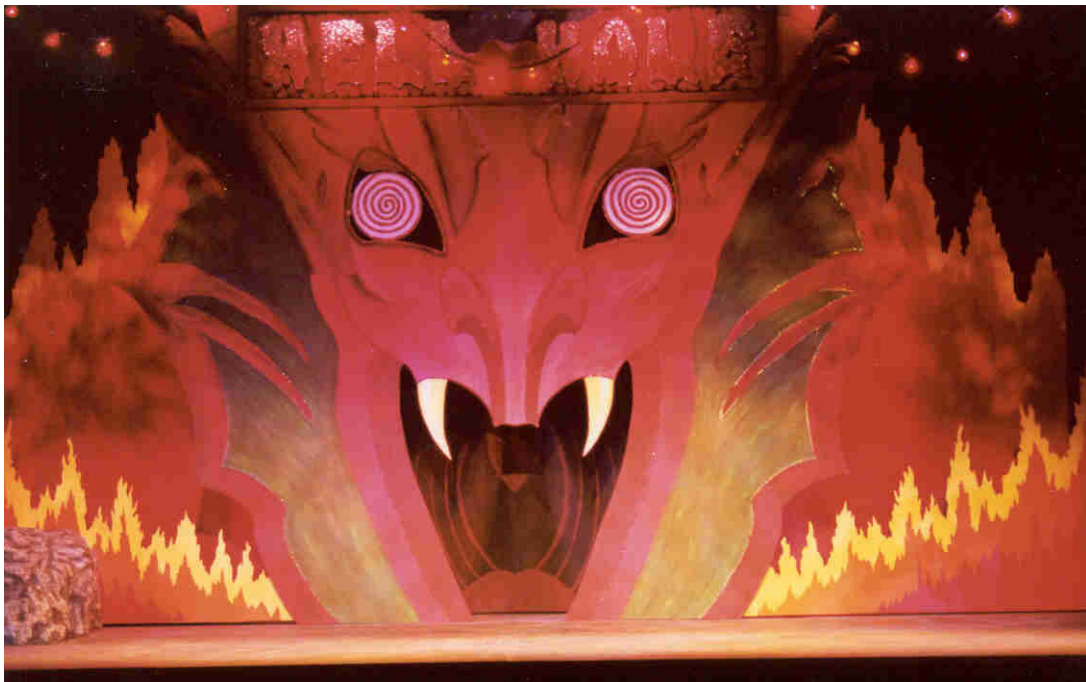


Fig. 6.62

HELL HOLE WITH SCENE LIGHTING



Fig. 6.63

HELL HOLE WITH TEXTURED LIGHTING

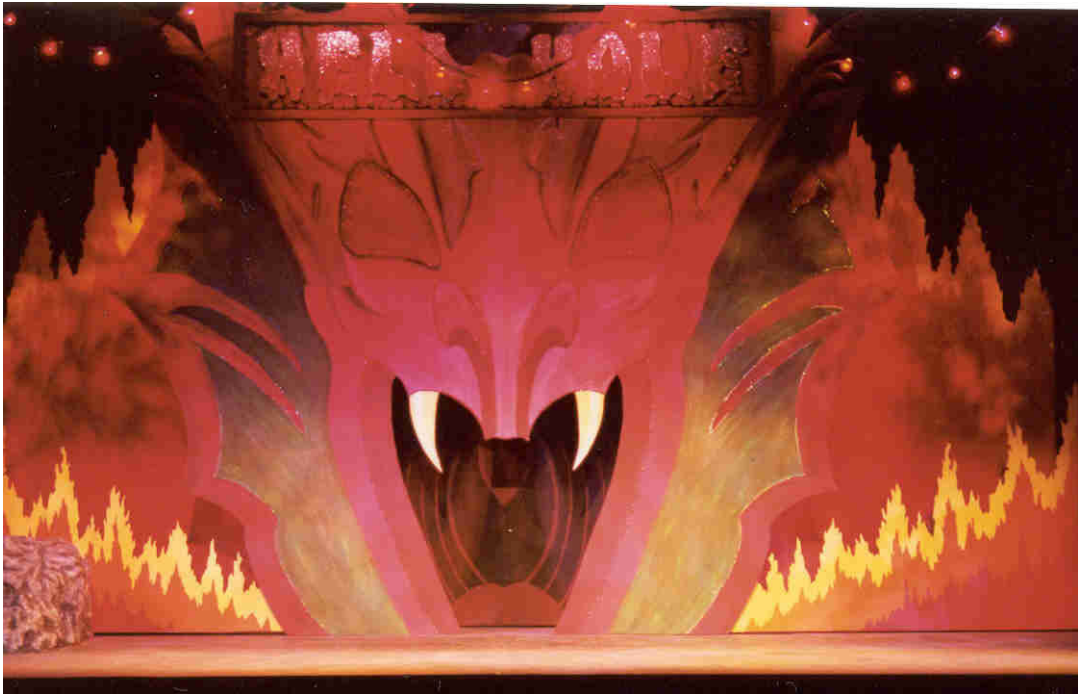


Fig. 6.64

SLEEPING HELL HOLE



Fig. 6.65

LEE IN HER THRONE



Fig. 6.66

FARLEY'S ROOST



Fig. 6.67

THE PODS

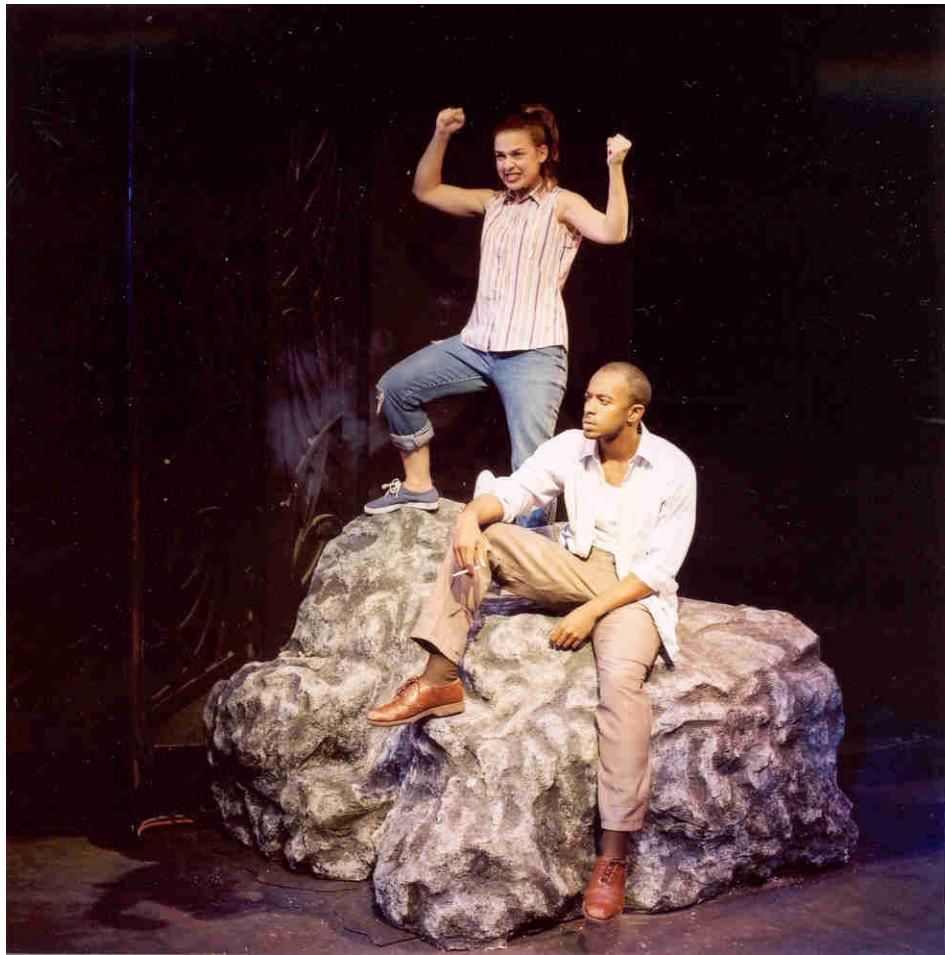


Fig. 6.68

A BIG CHUNK OF STYROFOAM



Fig. 6.69

FINAL ROCK TREATMENT

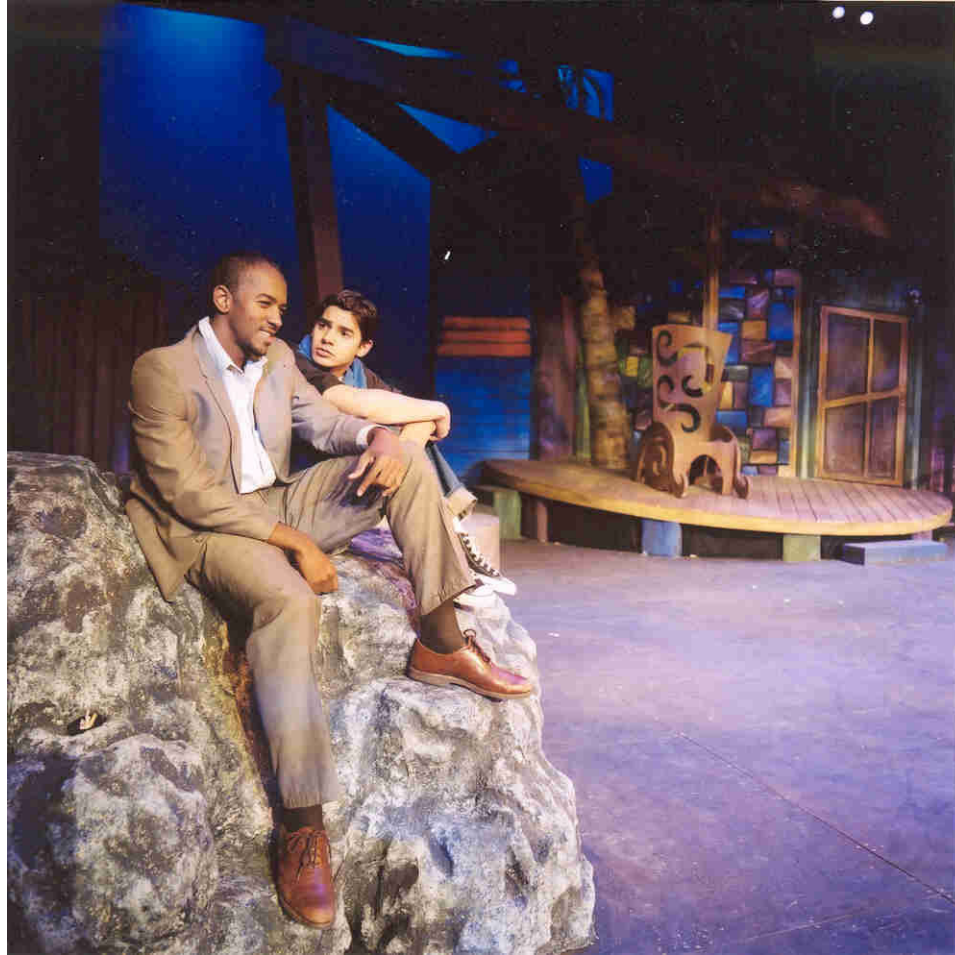


Fig. 6.70

BARON AND SHEP ON THE ROCK



Fig. 6.71

CORLIS STANDS UP TO HER MOTHER



Fig. 6.72

CORLIS' EXIT



Fig. 6.73

SMOKEY SEDUCES LEE



Fig. 6.74

CORLIS AND SMOKEY AT THE HELL HOLE

CHAPTER 7

POST-PRODUCTION EVALUATION

INTRODUCTION

The following is a personal evaluation of the Louisiana State University Theatre production of Marlane Meyer's The Chemistry of Change. Included are an institutional evaluation of Louisiana State University Theatre, a production evaluation, and a self-evaluation of my personal contribution to the production.

INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION

The Louisiana State University Department of Theatre's primary focus is on acting. This is not an unusual focus as the number of students who desire to be performers far out number the students who wish to pursue a design, technical, or scholarly approach. It is also understandable that the number of majors a department has greatly affects the funding for that department, thus the number of faculty, production staff, and facilities. Due to this imbalance of focus, all concerns appear to favor the performance arm of the department with little or no concern for the production side. These concerns can be identified as production process, selection of projects, scheduling, and staffing issues.

As discussed in the first chapter, my assignment to The Chemistry of Change was not well thought out. To my knowledge, the selection process for plays that are produced by our department include no discussion of what would be a challenging project for a student designer. Obviously as a working designer this option of doing shows for their educational value would not exist; however, as a student I do not believe it is too much to ask for educational value to be a consideration. The department also allows certain directors in the department to determine if they will work with student designers, regardless of input from the head of the design program. In my mind this system is unacceptable in an educational institution. The assignment of designers in our department is determined in a meeting after the plays have been selected and the dates posted. Assignments are generally based on the desire of designers not to be loaded with work on two consecutive shows.

Because our department produces two seasons of shows, Swine Palace Productions and Louisiana State University Theatre, scheduling becomes a nightmare. Every show I have designed at Louisiana State University has been delayed because the shop has had to stop work on my show to strike the set of another closed production. More often than not these delays are due to the professional arm of Louisiana State University Theatre, Swine Palace Productions. These delays are not only distressing for the director and designer, they tend to wear out an already understaffed scene shop.

Due to scheduling, there is little regard for the physical and mental health of students and staff on the production side. A Technical Director and Scene Shop Foreman

are the only paid staff in the scene shop. These two paid positions support both the Louisiana State University Theatre and Swine Palace Productions. The Technical Director also teaches in the classroom. The remainder of the labor for our shows is provided by an unskilled, unreliable student work force. The desire and intent is to train these students to become more skilled in the shop. Again, scheduling prohibits this happening. From the start of the semester to the opening of the last show there is little, if any, down time for our shop. There is barely time to catch your breath, much less train a student, who is much more interested in performing than becoming a competent stage carpenter. These problems are written off as whining and complaining, by the people who make the decisions.

If these problems are not soon addressed, it is my feeling that the production end of the department will self-destruct. Continually adding performance majors with no loyalty to the production end will only worsen this situation.

PRODUCTION EVALUATION

After sitting through six days of technical rehearsals and the opening night performance of The Chemistry of Change, I will now share my thoughts on the overall production. This evaluation will include direction, actors, costumes, lighting and publicity.

When I finally read the script for The Chemistry of Change, I was very excited to be assigned to the project. I genuinely enjoyed the script. I thought the characters that Ms. Meyer wrote about were interesting and entertaining. However, after seeing the production on stage I felt as if the actors were performing a different script than the one that I had read five months earlier. My perception of the play was based in the myth of nineteen fifties America. I saw the script as a twist on the squeaky clean situation comedies of that period. What I read in the script was a warped version of Leave it to Beaver or Father Knows Best. The character of Lee was June Cleaver gone bad. The children in the script all had major issues and problems that most of us would not think of people facing in the middle of the twentieth century. My initial impression was that Mr. Winkler's direction would reflect this sensibility and therefore the actors would live up to the warped environment the set provided for them. It did not. For instance, Mr. Winkler's assurance that the house façade being placed far upstage would be addressed in the blocking ultimately was not. The appearance was that the house façade was another one-dimensional drop backing one-dimensional actors.

Due to the fact that this production was designated as an undergraduate show and the graduate actors were not available for casting, the characters were cast way too young for their written ages and were frankly not believable. The acting style could best be described as screaming, particularly the character of Corlis. Although I often felt the actress portraying Corlis physically captured the role, the lack of voice control made the performance practically unbearable. The other actors appeared literally to be walking through their parts, perhaps all too aware that they could never live up to Corlis' screaming. It is understandable that mounting a production on a college campus often

requires casting young actors in roles beyond their reach; however, I do believe if the direction of the show had taken a different approach the performance could have been saved.

The Louisiana State University Theatre Costume Director, Kjersten Lester-Moratzka, provided the costume designs for this production. It is important to note that no preliminary design meetings with all designers in attendance were held. This fact is painfully obvious when viewing the production. Although I did not like the costumes, ultimately they were more appropriate to the performance than my scenic design would prove to be. The stylized approach of the scenery was in no way replicated in the costume design. My vision for the costumes would have been an exaggeration of the clothing clichés of the period. An appropriate example of this style would be the early seasons of the television show Happy Days. The costumes that appeared in the production were indeed reminiscent of the period, but in my opinion appeared as if the characters had bought them off the rack of a modern day K-Mart. In one scene, the costume designer provided a duplicate dress for Lee so that after her first encounter with Smokey she could appear appropriately disheveled. The effect of the second dress was lost since the duplicate dress had only a torn hem and one stain that was visible from the audience. Smokey first appeared in an appropriately red suit; however, the cut of the suit made no reference to the time period. The biggest costuming disappointment came from Corlis' homemade dress. This costume captured the exaggeration that all of the costumes should have but fell flat as Corlis' idea of a vamping dress. It is my opinion that the costumes were one missed opportunity after another.

Resident Lighting Designer, Professor Louis Gagliano, provided the lighting design for our production. The lighting for the production was well designed and executed. Professor Gagliano's use of colors and textures greatly enhanced the performers and the setting. The lighting design included a gobo moon that shimmered through the top of the palm tree. A star field added a magical touch at the end of the show; however, I believe the reveal of the star field and moon was lost on many audience members due to its late appearance at the end of the show. The lighting design was appropriately eerie for the first appearance of "Hell Hole" and Professor Gagliano took great pains in making sure the sign was effectively lit. Overall the colors and patterns were a great asset to the production.

The final production aspect that I will discuss is the approach the publicity office took to The Chemistry of Change. Normally I would not include this discussion; however, since I was originally asked to be involved in this aspect I chose to include it here. The normal publicity wheels turned on this show as with any other that our department produces. Local television appearances and a few minor newspaper articles appeared. The poster, or more appropriately, the flier for the show did not contain the image or the ideas I had initially discussed with Mr. Winkler. I was appalled when I first saw the image that would also eventually grace the program cover in full color (see fig. 7.1). The image portrayed a young man and woman dressed in fifties attire with various modern atomic symbols flying over their head. Behind the two people was a large disembodied devil head. Drawn onto the male figure were devil horns and a tail. Frankly

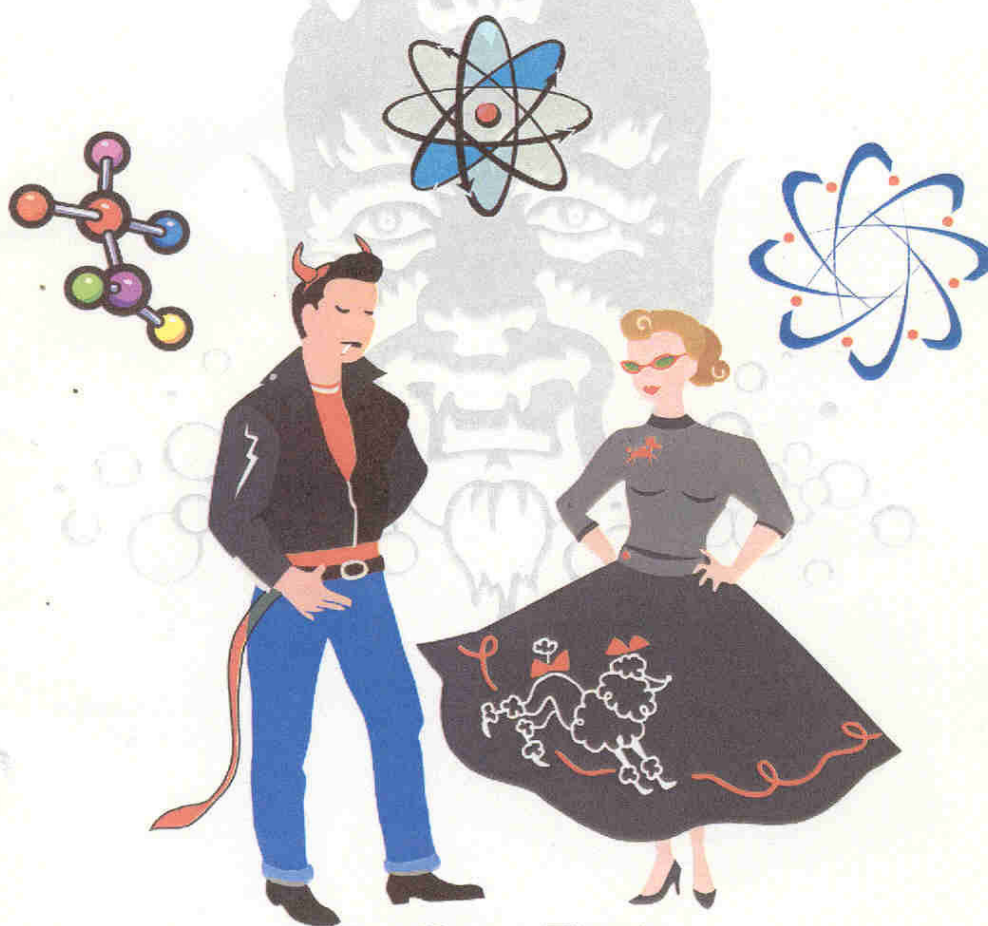
the image would have better served a production of Grease or Bye Bye Birdie. My biggest complaint about the image was that it looked as if someone had flipped through a clip art catalog and put it together.

I suppose it could be said that I am being overly critical of a show on which I was a member of the production team. Although I enjoyed working with Mr. Winkler and personally benefited from the experience, overall I felt the production got off track from what I thought was a shared vision. Ultimately, I enjoyed Ms. Meyer's script and believe it will benefit from future productions.

LSU Theatre Presents
The Chemistry of Change

by Marlane
Meyer

Directed by Anthony Winkler



The Shaver Theatre
October 25-November 4, 2001

Fig. 7.1

PROGRAM COVER

SELF-EVALUATION

The selection of The Chemistry of Change as my thesis project occurred in a meeting over design assignments for the 2001-2002 theatre season. At this meeting, which included Professors Anderson, Gagliano, and Dr. Michael Tick, I felt I was very good at expressing my views and desires concerning my design assignments. I easily could have taken what I was given without standing up for what I believed in and wanted. This was a big step for me.

The Chemistry of Change marked the earliest start on a project that I had ever had before. Time is a crucial element in the design process and starting the project in May of 2001 was a tremendous bonus for me. For once in my career as a designer I was not in the position of being in a frantic rush to complete a design and get drawings to the shop. Working with Mr. Winkler as a director has always been a treat. I have always felt that with him I could present any idea and have it given his full consideration. I also feel that my initial instincts about the concept of the show were good ones. I was disappointed by the fact that we did not continue the process together over the summer. I should have pursued this further.

Although my discussions with the director after our return from the summer did place more time pressure on us than if we had continued work over the break, I really enjoyed the give and take of our process. There were some issues I should have pressed my opinions about more, such as the inclusion of the giant rock, but I tried to accommodate Mr. Winkler as much as possible since The Chemistry of Change was his thesis project as well. I feel like some of our decisions were delayed because we did not want the process to end. The quest to promote creative freedom also delayed finalizing the plans.

I felt I only truly lost my temper on two occasions. The first when work stopped on my show to strike another set; however, I do believe I handled this situation well since I first had a private discussion with the Technical Director before bringing my concerns to the production meeting. The second time was the discussion of the set being too far upstage to be effective. Again, I felt I handled these situations to the best of my ability.

When looking at the final scenic design that appeared on stage for The Chemistry of Change, I am very proud of it. Due to elements outside my control, I did not feel it served the production that was presented on the Shaver stage. Someone commented to me that the actors never lived up to the set. I am in complete agreement with this statement, but unfortunately by the time I realized this was happening it was too late.

There are several things that stand out in my mind as successful elements of the set. I felt the façade of the house was successful. I really enjoyed working with the angles and felt the color palette complemented it appropriately. I felt that the carving of the flagstones and the rock were both successful. I was most proud of the raked deck. It was a challenge to draw and was very visually effective on stage. The appearance of “Hell Hole” worked very well and provided a much-needed dose of theatre magic to the

proceedings. I am also happy that over ninety percent of the drawings I produced for this show were done in the AutoCAD program. I do not think I would ever give up drawing with pencil and paper, but this experience will lead to more opportunities after my graduation.

There are also several scenic elements that I was not pleased with on this production. The pylons that were to appear to hold up the raked deck were put off to the last minute and ultimately did not serve their purpose. I had envisioned pillars of carved Styrofoam flagstone holding the decking up. There simply was not enough time to complete this and a single stone served as each pillar. The “Hell Hole” devil head drop, which was constructed in four segments, got its seams filled with joint compound so late that there was not enough time to appropriately blend the paint on the face. I had to sacrifice the color on the show drop images so that the front layer appeared as black and white images while the second layer was black light sensitive paint on black. I think the final look of this unit did work well with Professor Gagliano’s lighting. The hospital wagon could best be described as the most useless piece of scenery ever conceived or constructed. The purpose of the unit was to isolate an acting area so the character of Baron could deliver his monolog. The scene was blocked all over the downstage area and the character rarely stood in front of it. My conclusion was that the unit existed merely as a place he could put his cigarette out. The shop was also unsuccessful at getting noise from the casters on this unit to an acceptable level. The second treatment of the rock was unsuccessful. Originally this unit was treated as a realistic representation. When Mr. Winkler asked that I retreat it as a foreign object, the rock stood out as something other than a rock.

I did learn some important lessons working on this production. My first lesson was to make sure any problems you foresee you should personally remedy. The distance of the house façade was never adequately addressed. I realize that I should have started attending rehearsals earlier to make sure the problem was being addressed. I have always believed that as a student designer working in the scene shop on my own show was a disadvantage. Although I believe this to be a true statement, on this production I discovered a more distressing situation. That situation is having the director of the production as a member of the scene shop staff. On more than one occasion I would leave specific instructions for the shop only to find they had not been carried out. When I would question the Technical Director about these episodes the reply would always be that Mr. Winkler said he wanted it this way. The shop would take Mr. Winkler orders over mine to avoid the potential of having to revise something later.

Overall I would say that the project was a successful one for me. I am very happy that in the end the scene shop did come through for me and tried to accommodate my wishes. I gained knowledge about the AutoCAD program and gained confidence in utilizing it in the future. Finally, several audience members approached me and told me they really enjoyed the scenic design.

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VITA

Stephen E. Haynes was born and raised in Columbia, Tennessee. He received his Associates of Science in General Studies from Columbia State Community College in May of 1988. Two years later he received his Bachelor of Science in Theatre Arts from Austin Peay State University. After receiving the Bachelor degree he spent one year at the University of Tennessee in their Theatre Design graduate program. He has worked for such companies as Pennsylvania Center Stage, The Clarence Brown Company, Theatre Bristol, and Bristol Riverside Theatre. He will receive the Master of Fine Arts degree in May 2002.